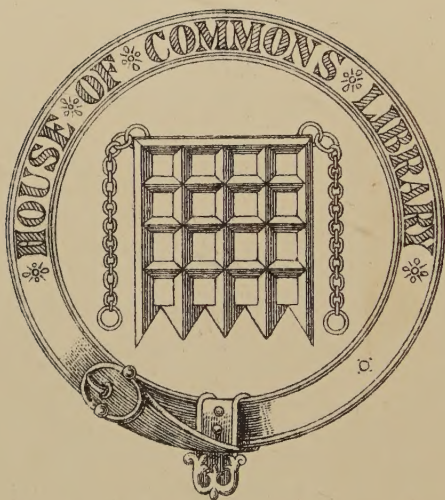


FOLK OF THE FURROW

CHRISTOPHER HOLDENBY



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FOLK OF THE FURROW

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BY
CHRISTOPHER HOLDENBY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY THE RIGHT HON.
SIR HORACE PLUNKETT
K.C.V.O., F.R.S., ETC.

LONDON
SMITH, ELDER & CO., 15 WATERLOO PLACE
1913

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TO A MAID OF KENT

INTRODUCTION

BEFORE this little book went to the printer, I was asked to read it, and, if I could do so honestly, to write an introduction recommending it to other students of rural life. This morning, with the proofs before me, just as I am leaving Ireland for the United States, I see clearly what I ought to say about this work. My difficulty has been that I do not know English rural conditions as I do Irish and American. But in my own experience in this field of social service, as, I daresay, in similar fields with which I am not familiar, the greater the differences in other conditions and circumstances, the more the fundamental importance of the human factor stands out. This will explain to readers of the following pages why I consider Mr. Holdenby's intimate and loving picture of the English agricultural labourer as informing and suggestive as it is opportune. If I state my reasons for this judgment I shall have given the best shape to the brief introduction I am asked to write.

It will be generally admitted that any good writing upon the subject of this book is opportune. Throughout the English-speaking world, interest in the social and economic condition of rural populations is growing apace. It is beginning to be felt that both statesmanship and philanthropy have failed in their duty to the countryside, and that, even in the interest of the cities, life and labour on the farm must for a while engage the sympathetic attention of the State and of the social worker. In England, where, more than in any other country dominated by British industrialism, the rural side of the national life has been subordinated to the urban, an agricultural policy appears to be at the moment a chief plank in the respective platforms of the rival parties. But even if the agricultural labourer had no vote value, and the national conscience were not aroused by his hard lot, economic considerations would compel both the landlord and the tenant farmer to cry out for some inducement to keep more labour upon the land. Tillage has declined at a disastrous rate, and the 'folk of the furrow'—their comfort, contentment, and efficiency—have now been recognised as what they have in fact long been, the crux of the rural problem.

Mr. Holdenby, in his personal experience—the true basis for such a book as this—has been able to master the labour aspects, but he has not overlooked the other branches of the rural problem. He has a most illuminating chapter on the housing question. He reveals, as only one who has tried it himself can reveal, the discomfort (and worse) experienced in many a cottage which to the passing tourist wears an idyllic aspect. In his chapter on ‘Nut-brown Ale’ we are made to realise why the local public-house, with all its evil consequences, fills a social need which the reformer must supply in some other way. The most fanatical ‘temperance-man’ would be forced to agree with Mr. Holdenby that, if the ‘Pub.’ is to go, a new social centre must be found. The squire does not figure prominently, but that there is a place and work for him may be inferred. The parson comes off badly. But the author has to recognise what is well known to all who have lived in a country village—the distrust of the ‘man on the land’ for the ‘man in black.’ He is assumed to be a Tory—to be half-way to (or wholly) a landlord—he is an ‘indoor man’—he speaks of spiritual mysteries while the crops are failing. The remedy is not more preaching of religion but an increase in the standard of comfort and

a redirected education. As I write, I believe these questions are being discussed at the Church Congress at Southampton. In the chapter 'A Village Gemot' the educational, social and political value of agricultural co-operation is brought out in a very interesting way. This alone would make me commend the book to the workers in the agricultural organisation movement in Ireland, and in those other parts of the United Kingdom, where rural reformers have done them the honour of following in their footsteps.

All this is, however, incidental. The main purpose of the book is to reveal to us the heart and mind of the folk who provide the cities with their food and their best blood, who give to the nation more than their share of its fighting strength, who conduct the greatest, and, if our poets see straight, the most ennobling of the nation's industries. Mr. Holdenby's literary sense adorns but does not obscure the analysis he makes of the labourers' activities, and his study has a true kinship with Mr. Rowntree's invaluable survey of their domestic economy. We come to feel that Hodge's intellectual slowness is really a mode of expression engendered by the slow processes of nature in contradistinction to the rapid achievement of modern manufacture. Take

him all in all his thought is larger, nearer to the realities of life, than that of the city dweller; his work is more dignified and thorough. He will be helped to take his proper place among the workers now because he is needed. That he will be helped in the right way depends upon how many of his helpers are in search of truth and how many are fishing for policies. This book should be read by those engaged on either quest.

HORACE PLUNKETT.

Ss. Celtic,
QUEENSTOWN HARBOUR,
October 3, 1913.

NOTE

AN Oxford man writing of field labourers is liable—like the driver of an old horse bus talking of motors—to be suspected of theorising about an aspect of life which he can only judge of from without. Some justification is necessary in order to obtain a hearing. I would say then, that in describing the lives and outlook of some English countryfolk in the south and west, I have only been giving actual personal experiences. As a boy I had walked beside the labourer, and it was always my desire to claim a closer intimacy with my friends of field, farm, and village. Therefore when the opportunity came, in order to gain the friendship of these men and women, I worked side by side with them as a labourer, paying for my experience with manual work, sharing alike their home and field life, and living as they on 15s. a week. My object was to know the meaning of hard labour, long hours, rough feeding,

and cramped circumstances. So I can say truthfully that this book portrays life as one labourer at least has experienced it. This intimate fellowship has extended over some years, and I hope it may endure all through my life. In the very temporary capacity of agent and the permanent position of a fruit-grower, I have come, too, into close contact with the countryman as his wage-payer and I have the opportunity of seeing him through the eyes of the farmer.

C. H.

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FOLK OF THE FURROW

CHAPTER I

THE CHALLENGE OF SILENCE

THE people on the land have not been easy to approach because their qualities have been found difficult of interpretation by those who have not had the opportunity to penetrate below the surfaces.

The countryman has earned for himself the epithet 'slow,' largely because his inborn composure is continually strengthened by the sense of duration and eternity which is given by contact with the earth. Because the countryman's solitude has trained him instinctively to listen rather than to talk, he is sullen or stupid. Because the varying fortune of the years has disciplined him to bear disappointment and even dearth, his heroic patience and fine courage are thought to be lack of initiative

and ambition, springing from contentment and conservatism. Because he times his work with the rising and setting of the sun, with the ebb and flow of the seasons—in a word, because he is at the mercy of natural laws and cannot produce his results by so many gross per minute, his work is undervalued; it cannot compete with the commercial and mechanical judgments of our age. We look at green meadows without realising the years of toil which are needed to establish a good permanent pasture. That coltsfoot and those thistles there will take some seasons' patience to eradicate. The apple orchard now in full blossom took ten years from its planting before it gave back a good return. All that time the trees were being 'made.' The farmer has waited more than three hundred days for his mare to foal and three years more before he put the foal in the shafts.

When the earth is sullen with storm or mighty with heat her mood is apparent to all men. These natural phenomena often cause a man to reckon with himself and to view the progress of his life in unison with the greater utterances of the earth around him. At other times moods less apparent—such as the psy-

chologist could scarce define—flit across the face of Mother Earth. Such influences Saul Kane of 'The Everlasting Mercy' felt. The countryman has captured these; he has lived with them and absorbed them quite unwittingly into his nature. Thus he has acquired many of his characteristics. As the Swain in the preface of Emerson's 'Earth Song' called to the elemental whisperings—'we sympathise: I fancy these pure waters and the flags know me, as does my dog'—so does the countryman respond to-day. While a great storm may have roused or depressed him unconsciously in a single crisis, these subtler forces have constantly brooded over him and moulded his course.

It was on a day of intense mystery, in the early spring, that I looked out over the lower slopes of the Windrakes from the top of the tower, whence one sees many a mile of pastoral country dotted with villages, cottages, and homesteads. These days of peculiar serenity—for the sun shone brightly and the air was clear—had always taken hold of me and caused me to question their portent. Earth Mother was communing with herself in a seclusion which was something more than reserve, less than

isolation; behind everything there seemed a sense of security and a little suspicion; the whole atmosphere summing up to me the unique aloofness of her own child, the countryman, an aloofness which kindles interest, challenges love. The green slopes of the Windrakes, where many cottages are forsaken and occasional villages deserted, accentuate this loneliness. Around the tower on which I stood there surged the questioning of years, a vast deep, noiseless sea lapping against the parapet and ever and anon spraying up into my face. I turned round to the friend who had accompanied me: 'This is the mystery of the country I want to penetrate. Listen—look down at it. I want to know the meaning of it and to be right down there at the bottom of it. I want to see into those cottages and know the secret of their silence and the seclusion of their inmates.' 'Ah,' burst in my friend, 'there you will have a difficult task: there you have got the silence of suspicion to combat, the legacy of centuries. They instinctively know you as one of the class that pushed them off the land. They may talk to you, but they won't show their real thoughts.' I knew my friend spoke truth yet it angered

the blood of the Yorkshire yeoman within me. 'Well, I mean to try, anyway,' I answered rather sharply. 'Somehow I will get to know them. I hav'n't robbed them—they've no reason to suspect me, and I'll tell them so.' My companion laughed; he was a doctrinaire, perhaps, but he knew that the country folk would not put by their reserve for words and protestations. 'I'm glad you're going to try,' he said; 'but bear in mind the sorry record which history gives of the land and its dwellers.'

With this new-formed resolution in my mind there came back all boyhood's impressions of the country—long days spent absorbing the silence of the Sussex meads and hedgerows or chasing the shadows in the Devon lanes, long summers spent in hidden farms in the Yorkshire dales or under the shadow of the Sussex downs. My great pleasure was to run alongside the cowman when he walked each evening over the meadows with the sack of bullock cake over his shoulder. There was no talk between us; nothing but the homely music of his corduroyed legs rubbing one against the other. I used to look up and wonder what he was thinking about. I was sure he knew

‘his job,’ for his acts were so unhesitating, yet he never talked about it. But I learned enough to know that his silence was not the silence of stupidity or sullenness. Occasionally I ventured questions which he readily answered if he understood my meaning, but he rarely volunteered a remark. On one occasion, in my simplicity I displayed rather extreme ignorance of the elementary facts of life. He seemed rather taken aback, for he gave vent to an ejaculation of surprise which means much more to me now than it did then. ‘Wot! Don’t they tell ’e them kind o’ things?’ And he explained to me quite naturally. But he evidently thought that ‘they’—my relations or class—were a very peculiar, incomprehensible caste, far removed from his own in life and thought. From that time onwards George the cowman became more communicative, and he asked me if I would like to help at the threshing. I still have most vivid recollections of that first glorious day of manual labour, though I was but fourteen at the time and have done many a long day’s threshing since. For the first time I drank beer with the men out of their gallon jars, and they came round me saying

I ought to turn farmer, 'for you'll be able to work along o' we reg'lar w'en you'm a bit bigger.' After that I went many walks with George the cowman, and I had a ride in Bill's wagon. It was the nearest I had yet come to knowing countryfolk. I had shared their work, their silence, their beer, and once George had expanded enough to talk to me of his relations with Farmer Ware. For one moment I had passed beyond the mysterious barrier of 'Ay, ay,' 'May be,' 'Likely enough,' with which the farm labourer hedges himself in. All through my Balliol days the memory of this experience remained vivid, though it never bore fruit, nor did I realise exactly what had been revealed to me.

Love of Earth and her mysteries is born in most people; some are anxious to study her features and anatomy; others her moods and tenses, the more peculiar aspects of Earth. The laws of scientific research afford a well-defined track to the former. To the latter each man must find his own path. Like so many others on this quest, I searched Earth's silent places by night and day, in sunshine and rain; I often ran over meadow and

hilltop when her face was white and chilled, and all her other children warm abed. I lay on the soft turf in the sunlight or stole down noiseless avenues of spruce or fir, listening for a whisper, hoping to catch her unawares. Ever as I passed by some homestead, setting dogs a-baying or startling some straying night bird, there came the great longing to share the life within, under the roof. I had caught Nature's silence, but not her human speech, and I came to see that I could only translate her personality into human terms through her own children. One night I climbed a high peak on the Windrakes some twenty miles from my cottage, to watch during the great silence and 'turning over' of the world, of which both Jefferies and Stevenson speak. Sure enough there came the stir in the air, a bird fluttered, there was a momentary sound of sheep, a cow called her calf, it answered back; but as I looked down over the plain, lights appeared here and there in the windows of scattered cottages, and disappeared again. Once more all was still. I had heard secrets, but I knew nothing of the movement behind the linen curtains. Once again I tramped forty miles through

the night to pursue Nature's silence, but still lights twinkling in cottage homes suggested a human life withheld to which I was yet a stranger. I was like a man travelling in a foreign country, seeking her spirit in an American hotel and in show places. I felt within me a great longing to penetrate the mystery, and when towards the end of my walk the cottage lights grew dim before the all-embracing dawn—in the great renewal of this Earth's most ancient sacrament—the hope seemed possible that the revelation of this human life—so continuous in its tradition, so insistent in its call, so pathetically alone—might be granted me.

But, when I began serious investigation, I soon found that I was not alone: I saw people living in the country—even on their hereditary estates—who had no knowledge or conception of the cottage life around them. To qualify for the title of country gentleman one must have a 'Place,' run with the hounds, drive the partridges; but what need one know of country life? 'There are still landowners in this country who take a broad-minded view of the duties of their position and of their

obligation to the cultivators of the land,' to quote from Mr. Spencer Pickering's recent paper in *Science Progress*. There are still to be found men who will start a Rothamsted or a Woburn, men who will make noble failures in Long Acre or brilliant successes at Brandsby. Still, the country has become the retiring ground not only of the successful business man, but of the pensioned officer and civil servant who brings his social club life with him. He has come there because he is no longer on the active list: he is meriting a well-earned rest; he has little energy left for a real participation in the life of the village and countryside—and small wonder. But even where families and estates bear the same ancestral title real intimacy with the land seems dying out. I passed through a village one day which was in great commotion, for the landlord of this ancient estate had just visited his tenants for the first time for thirty years, though he lived in the neighbouring county, spent the season in town, and wintered on the Riviera. This presented itself to me as a real and serious problem. It seemed to me that the countryman was ever getting more

isolated and becoming more and more of a silent and negligible unit. I do not think this is due merely to callousness, for how often do we hear the complaint, 'I can't get at those country chaps at all: they're so beastly reserved'; yet we find appalling cases of ignorance among those who have opportunity for finding out. I was talking to a 'gentleman farmer' who owned his own land and had farmed it twelve years—and put in his two days a week with the hounds during the season. 'I hear you're one of these social reformers,' he began: 'why don't you go and talk to some of the practical men, and see what they've got to say to you? All that chaps want is more wages, and a minimum wage'll ruin half the farmers in the country——' 'Wages aren't everything,' I interposed; 'the countryman wants a great many other things.' 'Yes, beer—I suppose,' broke in my friend. 'Wages and beer are the only things I've found a countryman keen on, and I've worked with 'em pretty often.' This was as far as my friend had got after twelve years' farming on his own land. No wonder countrymen are reserved—and they are reserved with a double inheritance. They

possess that natural and fascinating restraint and composure—the country's own precious, baptismal gift—but they have also a reserve born of poverty, of being undervalued, of being alienated from the land, of being mere lodgers upon it.

Just as any satisfactory interpretation of Nature in human terms is best expressed by clothing her with personality, so, if we are to make any judgment of the countryman's character we can only do it by giving a place—and a very large place—to considering his environment. Let it be again insisted upon that his environment is exceptional. He is brought very close to the elemental things of life—production, birth, growth, passing, and renewal. These things are constantly before him in their most simple forms. He is living on primeval hills or on vast plains which speak of buried histories, of Roman camps, of great rivers once rushing to the sea. He is very near contact with the dwellers round 'Pook's Hill.' Time in the country has a significance of its own, which takes a more due proportion in life's daily round; there is a restful monotony ever playing as it were

one melody; there are few jarring notes to set things out of tune. The countryman falls into step. The struggle of life is less for money and luxury than for the initial necessities of existence—a very primitive struggle indeed. If a man suffers he is thrown on himself. These aspects of country life no true countryman can avoid. I do not suggest that he is conscious of his environment; probably he would absorb it far less completely and naturally if he were. I do not think countryfolk, in our land especially, are analytical about their own psychology. The countryman is just conscious that there is a difference between himself and the townsman, between himself and the week-end visitor, even between himself and the folk who have imported a little town life into the old mansion. That is enough for the countryman. He cannot explain it; but he resigns himself to it, and is silent. He will talk to you perhaps, but he will not tell you his thoughts. Nature does not stop to explain herself and her paradoxes to the mere onlooker; in the same way her child lives his own life naturally and unconsciously. He has neither time nor means of expression to justify himself to the world.

He of all people has least chance of exploring realms other than his own, or realising worlds and outlooks more complex. Hence the ways of people are often incomprehensible to him: he is narrow-minded.

Up to the present the countryman has really known very little about his own position and its possibilities. There has only been one serious effort to bring him to such a knowledge. He knows nothing of history, of enclosures, of common rights. He hardly realises the potentialities of the soil and the just complaint he has against low farming. Yet there is the inborn feeling in him that he is of the land, and the land is by right part of him—a feeling akin to that which is native in every human being, that he possesses right and inheritance to some ‘patria.’ But the countryman is alienated from the land though he lives on it. He can only get back to it in any real sense through struggle and opposition. He realises there is injury somewhere; he does not know where to place it. Most naturally he fathers the wrong on those he sees wielding power around him. Suspicion has reached a painful point almost stultifying action. I have often

known a good act done for the village by the squire or parson criticised in these terms : ' Ay, ay ; it 's right enough, but wot d' you s'pose 'e 's goin' to get fur 'is trouble ? Somethin', you bet, or 'e 'd never 'a done it.' Of course the countryman has the paralysing realisation that his powers are pretty generally despised, that his labour is regarded as unskilled. His wages are enough to tell him this, and the ill-judged small holding schemes for dilapidated townsmen display the utter ignorance of their promoters. The countryman has obvious faults of slowness, awkwardness, and ignorance, which have so long been made the most of by those who see nothing of the other side. These sketches are full of such instances, but they attempt to go beyond these very conspicuous characteristics.

The more I thought over this question, the more convinced I became that the countryman was only to be approached through the channel of work. He has a great respect for endurance and manual labour. I determined to get as near to the labourers as possible—to become one of themselves. The labour market in my district was overcrowded. Almost daily I

saw men asking for work in vain, so for my own peace of mind I am glad that my 'boss' thought that I should be well paid for my labour by the experience I gained, which in truth I was. By limiting my own expenditure to the men's wages I had perforce to undergo the same routine of experience that they had. Perhaps fortunately, at the time my own financial circumstances would allow of nothing else. The first day in corduroys was a day of small sensation, but it was the quickest way to efface oneself and one's class. I remember a woman, in whose cottage I lived for some months, afterwards explaining to me, in her own way, how she lost her silence and reserve. 'D'rectly you comed to the cottage and sat down in that there chair so simple like, I know'd as I could tell 'e anything.' She just meant that she felt that there were no barriers to be broken down—the familiar corduroys appealed to her.

When one has spent days 'mucking out' the pigstyes with the lads, carrying the pigwash on a yoke over one's shoulders at the bidding of the stockman, one learns to put countrymen in their true position and view them in a right perspective. Nights spent on a sack of chaff

beside a sick horse, calving heifer, or farrowing pig—days spent, with bent back, strawberry planting or ‘cutting out’ mangold, introduced one to a new environment, gave one fresh clues. Hoe alongside of the labourer, day in, day out, and you begin to see things in a line with him. Work with him: live and feed with him: go work on his small holding or in his garden after hours: play and rest only when he does: make his interests your own—then, amidst the busy noise of threshing or in the still lane on Sunday afternoon, the countryman will reveal himself. Then, and not till then, one feels the full truth of Whitman’s words:

Now I see the secret of the making of the best persons,
It is to grow in the open air, and to eat and sleep with
the earth.

Through these considerations and by these simple means I was drawn into the families of countryfolk to whom I try to do no more than justice in these chapters. I think I can fairly say I have clung to the ‘divine average.’ My mates for the most part do not talk of art, literature, or science; I have not picked or chosen in order to present attractive ‘characters.’

I have been faithful to my friends, though I have spoken as freely of their faults as of their virtues. If I seem too often to find excuses for them, it is not because I am not ready to admit them to be wrong—they are often very wrong; but I have tried to suggest why they are so, and to confess how very easily I should commit the same faults were I permanently in their position. It is their ideas and point of view I have tried to emphasise all the time, and not my own. It is their attitude to all the facts of everyday life which I think is so extremely important. Their home life, moral conduct, religion, hopes, fears, material well-being—these are the things with which we must familiarise ourselves before we can hope to make two worlds meet. We may then understand just a little, and learn to forgive and explain things which sometimes seem so irritating, and to admire things we have never appreciated. If there is to be any hope of a mutual understanding this spirit of forbearance and toleration must be carried far on both sides, and I believe that mutual acquaintance is the best way of spreading this understanding. We have not all the chance of becoming the mate of the

yokel. Mayfair usually meets the countryman only for week-ends on holiday, and the latter, in his hobnails, treads on the patent leather toes of his critic. There is yet much curious misunderstanding to be combated. Not so long ago the attitude which we so often hear expressed, that 'these people really don't need the same things that we do,' was strikingly illustrated to me. A really beneficent and paternal landlord was extolling one of his tenants and boasting that he had never taken a holiday for forty years. It did not seem to occur to the squire that this was an appalling confession. But the toilers of the field are human beings. I have made holiday with them when they have taken their first day off for five or six years. 'I've often wanted to go over yonder hill a'fore; I thought as there must be a fine bit o' country,' as one man remarked to me after a day's ramble on a hill he had looked out on all his life.

I push my mates forward as the best of all advocates of their own cause. In the same way I used to try to familiarise them with the ideas and ideals of 'the toff.' If one has only leaned over the gate with Gissing and

watched those 'brawny brown-necked men' at their work, one cannot understand. Nor from the other side of the hedge can the thirsty labourer in a cloud of dust see anything but the relentless pursuit of pleasure as the motor dashes by. It is the human side of the problem I want to emphasise since I have had the privilege of mixing with many countrymen. Economic theories must have due recognition in every industry, but the human being must be allowed to stand side by side with the economic man. I would like to say as strongly of my country friends' hopes and fears what Jefferies said of his beloved Earth :

'The Sun is stronger than science and the hills are more than philosophy.'

CHAPTER II

NUMBER 34, OR HILL'S COTTAGE

ONLY a narrow strip of flower border, barely two feet wide, separated Hill's Cottage from the dusty main road. But even this patch of ground was made the most of: there were dark gilliflowers and yellow alyssum, clumps of pansy and white arabis, and the large watering-can nightly freshened up their dusty faces and left a gay spot on the tired roadside. It must have struck the passer-by that ground was precious in these parts.

There was not even a knocker on the wooden door, so I rapped rather softly with the handle of my stick. I hardly knew what it would sound like from within, or how the inmates would receive it. As no one answered I had plenty of time to stare at the blistered surface of the door and take in the two figures—34—on the central panel. I could distinctly hear

movement inside, so I ventured on a louder knock, and then I began to hope it was still not loud enough! But a woman's voice shouted, 'Mother, there be someone a knockin' at the door: p'r'aps it's the baker, we've but part of a loaf; shall I take two?' Then came distinctly the weary reply: 'All right, Betty, I'll go mysel'; like as not it's someone a worryin' as usual to as' the way somewhere.' Next minute I stood looking at a tall, wrinkled, bony woman who gazed at me through a pair of very round spectacles with an air of complaining weariness. I was in such a hurry to assure her that I was no tourist that I quite forgot the explanatory sentence I had prepared, and simply blurted out, 'I'm looking for lodgings: have you got a bedroom? I've come to work on Benson's farm.' The woman did not look in the least intelligent or pleased, I thought—indeed I felt like beating a hasty retreat—but her first words partly explained my cold welcome. 'I bes very 'ard o' hearin'; would you please to speak a bit louder?' I repeated myself in stentorian tones, with the full consciousness that I was being 'taken in' through the crack of a door which stood ajar

at the back of the cottage, but there was no change of expression on the woman's face. 'Oh, you be the gennelman as Farmer Benson said as might be coming, be you? I du'nno, I'm sure—I ain't got no room to take in lodgers 'ere, and I du'nno wot the likes o' you'll be wantin',' she replied. I knew at once that I had come right up against that old suspicion—that I was being regarded through those great round spectacles as one of an unintelligible caste. 'If you'll be wantin' special meals,' she continued, 'I ain't got no time, and besides we've only got our own sittin'-room like'—and she seemed preparing to retire and close the front door, when I advanced one foot on to the wooden step just in time, feeling very much like a beggar. 'I don't want a sitting-room,' I hastened to explain; 'I'll be out on the farm all day; all I want's a bedroom, and meals with you. I understand your son's working on the farm too, so we'll want our meals at the same time together.' She still hesitated, there was no doubt she did not want me. 'I du'nno, I'm sure,' she repeated; 'I've got most all the work to do mysel', for Betty she can't do much, and the doctor says as how

she must rest a bit ; and what with a bein' out at the squire's of a Monday for washing and of a Friday for cleanin'——' 'Well,' I burst in, 'I'll give just about as much trouble over meals and things as your son, and no more.' 'I don't think as I'd care to do it under 14s. a week,' she began. I fancy she thought she had settled me this time by asking what to her was rather much, but I advanced my second foot within the doorway with 'Right you are: if that suits you, it suits me. Let that be settled.' Mrs. Hill made one final struggle and then gave in to a temporary armistice. 'That can't be includin' beer'; and then, as this did not shake my determination, 'Well, if it don't suit neither party there be no need to go on with it. We doesn't know the ways o' the likes o' you, nor you our'n, but we can see; Sam'll be 'ome to his tea just after six, if you'll be taking some. P'r'aps you'll be likin' to see your room; maybe it's too small.'

I wandered out through the tiny but well-filled garden and across the meadow towards where I heard the ceaseless monotony of a water-wheel. By the old wheel I sat down to

reflect. This was the beginning of a new experiment, and I still seemed in the old position, yet the timeless perseverance of the wheel gave me hope. I was not altogether surprised at the coolness of my welcome, but I had hoped unreasonably that Mrs. Hill would treat me as a labourer straight away. Though she had asked me a very moderate sum I felt that she thought she had asked too much—more than she would have asked ‘one of her own sort.’ I was still smarting from my experience in the last cottage where I had lived, but lived foolishly as a man apart, with my own sitting-room and meals, and been badly cheated; and I wondered whether Mrs. Hill, in the same spirit, meant ‘to make as much out o’ the gennelman as we can.’ I had not yet learned that these folk’s idea of morality is an extremely personal and individual thing. This dawned upon me by degrees, and when the Hills and I became mutual friends I began to honour their faith and scrupulousness. ‘Oh, I bes including the washin’ and mendin’, and a’ course you can have a glass o’ beer whenever you be wanting;’ and then if I were absent for a meal it was with the greatest difficulty that I could get my

hostess to receive the full weekly pittance of 14s. Their hospitality, too, was most embarrassing, and it was all I could do to keep them from giving me continually the 'lion's share' of everything. From me they did not want to accept gifts and favours. The time came when my friends talked freely with me about 'the gentry and them more fortunate folk,' and I really do not think that most of them realised that they had any moral obligation towards these classes as such; on the contrary, it was almost part of a code of honour, where there was no personal acquaintance, to get as much as possible 'out o' them chaps with plenty o' money.' It was a matter of congratulation among the men as they talked at work if they had succeeded in 'doing' a person in a better position, or even if they had 'sloped sommat' from the well-to-do. 'It won't do 'im any 'arm to part wiv' a bit,' or, 'E could well afford to giv' it away,' were the usual justifications. It is the idea of a legitimate prey, the right to make some folk disgorge, the suggestion of just reprisal. It is in the same spirit that one does not overwork if one is doing a job for the rich. 'I takes my time

like.' It is often the same spirit, too, which initiates poaching rather than the actual material gain. There is a satisfaction in carrying the war right into the enemy's country. I know so well the attitude in which the villagers touch their hats to the gentry while they are in their employ. The salute is thrown in with the service, but it ceases with the latter. I do not say this position is universal, though I think it is rather general, and also very natural, and I want to emphasise at the same time that these very folk have a high and generous code with people of whatever class as soon as they come into close personal touch. As I think of that broad sheet of water rippling lazily over the weir, and then turn to where it comes into intimate contact with the mill-wheel, putting forth all its strength and energy, it exactly expresses to me the outlook I wish to describe.

While I saw that countryfolk wanted to keep me at arm's length I realised there was something of suspicion, if not even of fear, in their reserve. For here were folk obviously in poor circumstances, apparently indifferent to the chance of bettering their position, at

FOLK OF THE FURROW

least temporarily, and 'making good money.' They would not have refused a labourer at 10s., or possibly even 8s., yet from their own lips I know from cottagers that their prejudice and shyness impelled them to try to drive me away though they were in want of money. I little dreamt that the time would come when a labourer and his family would invite me to share a cottage, and another suggest that I should go and be his neighbour, for I had no idea how much the personal touch was lacking in their lives. I met with the same reserve from the men on the farm. I started work there at a time when every hand is valuable on the land. I knew that many of the men had small holdings or good gardens, and I asked more than once if I could go up and give them a hand after hours. I was always put off with, 'Thank 'ee, I'll be glad of a hand some night. I'll let 'e know when I gets a bit busy.' I knew one man at least was actually paying for help, and several more needed it badly. At last the time came when they did whistle under my window with, 'If 'e cares for a bit o' a job to-night, I'd be glad of a hand'; but it was only after I had worked with them

shoulder to shoulder for many weeks, and they saw I could do decent work and was in earnest.

When I knocked at the door of Number 34 it was with the consciousness of this distrust. As Mrs. Hill looked at me I was perfectly certain that she was not giving me a fair chance as an individual and a human being. I was a 'gennelman.' If I had known the history of Number 34 and all it meant, as I faced the door, I should not have felt so despondent that night. I should have expected to be regarded as a mere number myself. Some days afterwards the postman stopped me for the first time in the lane and held out a letter which I had been expecting for several days. 'Maybe you're Mr. Holdenby?' he asked; 'I've been all round the parish with this 'ere letter and can't find the owner nowhere.' 'Yes, I'm Mr. Holdenby all right; but why couldn't you find me?—it's addressed right enough: Number 34, Weststoke.' He looked puzzled. 'Ay, but I've no idea where Number 34 bes—there ain't no numbers—and I've been on this round several years now.' I pointed out our cottage and assured him that it had a number

on the door, at which he seemed very surprised. 'Oh, 'Ill's Cottage, you means; well, I'll know all right next time.' At teatime my new friends solved the mystery. 'Ay, them numbers was put on some years back by the squire's lady. She comed round visitin' now and then, and I 'spose she wanted to look up who Number 34 was afore she knocked—she had plenty o' time to forget 'tween her visits! But they never comes down here now. They say as the old 'ouse be let and p'r'aps there may be a squire as 'll live 'ere more now.' The inhabitants of the village are only too often mere numbers, if they could but receive and give a little more personal individuality. If 'the gentry' are a class to them, how much more are 'the cottagers' a class to those without, even to the well-meaning parish visitor.

When I came to know the inmates of Number 34, I followed the postman's example and called it ever afterwards 'Hill's Cottage.' I began to realise how very little real personal influence had ever come into the Hills' lives from outside, how little interest or encouragement had ever come their way. It was not that they did not want it, or that they were

unreceptive ; I rather found that they responded to personal recognition. But village life has become so isolated even within its own insularity. Mrs. Hill had been left a widow with three children—a boy of fifteen, another of eleven, and a daughter between the two ; the fight had begun immediately Hill died. ‘ You see, after ’Ill died we ’ad to turn out o’ our cottage ’cos the ’state carpenter ’ad a mind to ’ave it, and it were a good cottage like where I might ’a made a bit a’ takin’ lodgers. But this ’ere were the only other cottage goin’, so I ’ad to turn to charin’ and washin’ and workin’ reg’lar in the fields to keep the children in bread an’ boots. Well, Sam, o’ course, ’e ’ad to go out straight to work, though ’is father and me ’ad planned for him to ’ave a good edication and get a better chance somewhere. An’ then there was Betty—she’s always been too weakly like to go into service reg’lar. An’ there’s Jim still at school, an’ the master said as he was a clever lad, but ’e don’t stick to ’is books as I’d like. ’E wants ’Ill ’ere to talk to ’im.’ Now that I know Mrs. Hill, I see how completely mistaken my first impressions were. Her deeply wrinkled face and angular figure

now tell me of the lonely struggle of a woman full of courage, pride, and love for her family. She was doubly lonely in the deafness which had handicapped and partially shut her out from human distractions. She had faced sorrow and beaten it down with sheer hard labour, but it had left her weary. Only when the family were laughing together, or the boys teasing Betty, would her face light up into a smile. 'I don't know one bit wot them naughty children be saying,' she would remark to me, 'but I likes to see them 'appy, though they don't never talk loud enough for I to 'ear, and I often wonders whether they don't want me to.' 'Oh, it be all right, mother,' Sam would shout; 'we be only tellin' Betty 'as 'ow one o' Beeson's sows turned cannibal an' ate 'er family.' Now that Sam had come to manhood, he saw all that his mother had done for the family. I think his 'Hulloa, mother!' and the strong arm he put round her were the only real pleasures of her life. 'Mother, you be lookin' tired to-day; I'll do that job while thee sits down.' And sometimes she would sit quite still for an hour or more gazing into space. He used to tell me with evident

pride, 'Mother, she've been right good to we children. She've worked like any man to keep us in food an' clothes; it were long enough afore I could bring back much to 'elp 'er. It's been a 'ard time for mother.' And not very far away the Hills had relations who had become successful farmers, but I never knew them to come to Number 34, and, as no one else ever came, the inmates of Hill's cottage fought it out by themselves.

Sam was just twenty and getting a man's wage when I came to know them, so the worst of the struggle was over, for this boy had taken upon him all the responsibilities of the head and supporter of a family. It is not a start in life to encourage a man, with such a handicap; from necessity rather than choice he had drifted on to the land. He had had ambition to 'go to the town and make better money'; instead he found himself amongst a gang of labourers, some of whom had drifted into it as he had, forty years before and were still drawing the same wage. Unconsciously the captivity of the gang had entered into Sam's outlook, and as we strolled together in the evenings or on Sunday afternoons he gradually unfolded to

me the hopelessness of it. He had ambition; but with a family to keep at his age, and his mother getting old, he had no chance of saving, still less of working a small holding on his own, and he could not leave the home to go out to seek his fortune. Moreover, Sam loved a girl in the next village, and he had 'walked out' with her ever since his school-days. He gradually told me all, until he used to trust me with messages to 'the girl,' if I chanced to be going over to the village before himself. 'You see, 16s. don't go far among the lot on us, and I don't think as Betty'll ever be very strong to work; and Jim, he's an odd sort o' chap and don't take things serious enough like; and the girl's people don't think it good enough 'er goin' on with it: they says she ought to find something better.' Though he was facing down a very gloomy pass, he took it bravely and stolidly. 'Hang it all, give yourself a chance,' I began, trying to cheer him: 'In a few years' time you may be a foreman on a much better wage: you've only got to keep going, and something good'll turn up.' 'Wot!' interjected Sam with a laugh, 'd' you really think I might get a better job?

No such luck. Look at all them chaps as 'ave gone on workin' 'ere for years.' Nevertheless this random conversation, this little interest from without, set Sam Hill thinking. He only needed a suggestion, a push, a little initiative; but, like so many of his friends, he had never been out of a ten-mile radius; he had never even climbed to the top of yonder great round hill, which I always imagine to be the centre of a big world. Here the great arc of sky descends on the round green knoll, and the whole distance seems flooded with possibilities mingled in the sun-rays. Here the world is at one's feet, and only one's own cowardice seems the limit of one's triumphs. But Sam had come home tired from work ever since he was fifteen; he had never felt like climbing to the top; he had not had the chance of breathing its clear air. There should be moments in every man's life 'When fancies break, and the senses wake,' and he can 'know life's a dream worth dreaming.' Sam had the capacity for doing well, and a little persuasion set him going. A few weeks later, as luck would have it, the 'boss' gave notice to the men one morning that he had an application for a man who was

needed in a distant county to fill a foreman's job. It meant promotion and an increased wage. There was seemingly no response; but one heart leapt. Sam got the post. He had to leave his own county, but he was able to send back enough money to help the home and keep himself too. And by degrees his young brother stepped into Sam's place in the gang. Sam had risen to the occasion and jumped out of his groove. He was gaining valuable experience in other counties.

When last I saw Mrs. Hill my first question was about Sam. 'Oh, 'e've done very well, but 'e misses the 'ome comforts that terrible, I expec's to see 'im back anywhen.' He returned, but with experience that got him a foreman's place at home. He had ventured and gained. 'The girl' and her parents take a lively interest in his small holding. They may be seen picking peas there together many a summer night. They all look forward to the first year the trees come into bearing.

CHAPTER III

THE COTTAGE COVETED

So I came to share the life at Hill's Cottage, and I passed on elsewhere to mix with other families. I am still puzzling over the home comforts which Sam missed, yet, like him, I want to return to Number 34. The shepherd tried to persuade me with, 'Well, you jus' make up your mind to stay along o' we. The boss often says as you baint no jibber, so like as not 'e'd give 'e 14s. an' the cottage nex' to we. I'm thinkin' we mus' be keepin' thee for good this time.' His invitation was more than half in earnest, for he has long ceased to regard me as other than a possible neighbour in the two-roomed cottage next to his; but I doubt if he fully realised how much I longed to go and 'be his neighbour like.' I want to go back, not because I still dream of the ideal cottage coveted as I once dreamt of it,

but because I picture the real cottage revealed as I found it. There is a space and freedom there which I have sought elsewhere in vain. When I say 'space' I do not imply 'cubical capacity,' for those who enter the cottage, as the labourer lives in it, will seek such in vain. But where the sunlight steps in boldly at the open door, there also enters freedom and simplicity, warmth and welcome. Let me say at once that I have never lived in what would locally be termed a 'real bad sort o' cottage.' On the contrary, I have always shared averagely good cottages. One, indeed, the agent told the inmates, when they asked for some alteration, was 'the best cottage on the estate, and if you want to complain, there are plenty who will be willing to take it as it is.' But even this cottage was none too roomy. It is as a rule, however, only the better class of cottages which can offer any hospitality to a lodger in the way of sleeping accommodation.

Before we go round the village, I should like you to share the hospitality of such a cottage, bearing in mind that it is above the average, that the inmates are receiving a moderately good wage for the country, and

that they are helped by 'taking a lodger.' It is a cottage with three bedrooms, a parlour, and living room. 'Come in an' make yoursel' at 'ome. I knows as you'll fall into th' ol' ways an' do jus' as 'e likes. Draw up to the fire; now, mother, where be the bench? I remembers as 'e was always Mr. 'Oldenby's fav'rite place. There's a cup o' tea goin' an' a slice o' bread an' butter on the plate, and the mother'll cut 'e some more.' Such is the splendid hospitality that would always greet you, once you were known. As for the wooden bench, it was but three roughly planed pieces of wood, 'a bit o' dad's own carpentry,' but it was good when one was really tired and drowsy of an evening. It was just the right height from the ground to enable me to rest my arms on the table and prop my head on my hands. Then one could look straight into the fire, and chat and doze alternately, until the day seemed sufficiently worn out, and 'the mother' would rouse us to go to bed. The living room is very small, and besides the wooden bench there is room for a table and four chairs: then we cannot get round the table, and it becomes quite a problem arranging the family

at meals. One side of the stove stands the copper—a boon indeed—but yet a gift rather out of place. I must confess I dreaded washing days in hot weather, for we took our meals in the tiny room in the combined heat of the stove and steam of the copper, and but half the window was made to open. On such occasions I was only kept awake myself by speculating as to how many of the smaller members of the family would be overcome, and demonstrate the fact by going off to sleep with their heads resting in a plate of potato and gravy.

On the other side of the stove was conveniently placed the one cupboard in the house! I must open the doors, for the inside is symbolical of so much of cottage life. On the floor are accumulated the family boots and leggings. We do not have time to clean our boots very often, and dad is usually faced with a big problem on Sunday mornings. But I never see the family boots without recalling a conversation with a weakly cottage friend of mine. She was looking very ill, and I urged her to get a few weeks' rest in hospital. 'I'd jus' enjoy it,' she replied, 'for it be weary carryin' these 'ere pains about with me all day, but as long as

I can keep on, I keeps on, an' adds to what the dad makes. You see it be the kiddies, and I can keep them in boot-wear; but a scufflin' alon' them dusty roads to school it be terrible bad for the boots, an' sometimes it's almost more 'an I can do.' The first shelf of the cupboard contains the family nightgowns by day and day clothes by night. The bedrooms are too small to allow of much washing or dressing upstairs. As my friend and I would sit at breakfast at about quarter to six, the wooden stairs would creak, the latch would lift, and one by one the little night-gowned figures would slip into the room and scramble on to the chairs around the table, clamouring for their portion. At night, as we sat round the fire, 'mother and dad' would undress the 'kiddies' and go through the ceremonies of bath night in the tiny kitchen. All this congestion adds so much to labour and makes it difficult to keep the living room clean, tidy, and airy. Indeed, even the 'grown-ups' had to seize the opportunity of 'getting a tub' here when the rest of the family were out or gone to bed. The second shelf contained the provisions which were in actual use—the butter, jam, sugar, tea, a tin of

condensed milk; the plates, cups, glasses, knives and forks. Fortunately, after great agitation, a tiny larder had been added to the cottage; otherwise I do not know how the rest of the provisions would have fared in such close proximity to the fire, the dirty boots, and half-worn clothes. The top shelf was shared by the cooking utensils, the 'mother's thread basket,' and a few broken toys and torn books for the children.

But the second shelf brings me to the food. As for the tea, it is strong with that roughness which sets one's teeth on edge. It was only made palatable with at least four lumps of sugar, or rather two dessert-spoonfuls. And the bread and 'butter,' of course it was always cut, and I often wondered that 'the mother' even found time to do anything else but dispense our staple diet. Yet she did, and I have even known her produce home-made gingerbread and pastry. I learned well the mode of combining cheese and pickles, and I became an excellent judge of the flavour of potatoes. The great thing, if possible, is to find gravy from somewhere in which to crush the potatoes, and for this purpose my friends usually pro-

duced something they called 'meat.' There was not much of it, and I doubt if there would have been any without a lodger, and it was so cooked as to extract all the goodness. I would defy anyone but a butcher to name whence these dainties came and from what beast, though I increased my knowledge considerably about the muscles and sinews of our vertebrates. Once a week we often had a 'decent piece of meat,' and the family knew how to appreciate it. There are thousands of cottages where they do not always see fresh meat once a week. I have lived in one such. When one realises that wages are as low as 11s. a week in some places, this is not surprising. The other staple article of food was bacon. After all this time I cannot face the thought of it with equanimity. We did not even waste the rind. It was bacon, because I could see the bristles, though it tasted like what I imagine tallow candle to be. When we are in a district where fruit and vegetables are obtainable, when we have a patch of garden of our own and can keep a few hens or a pig, our diet is so much the more palatable. Our great treat was tinned herrings on Saturday nights. If it

were not that I am certain my friends are underfed and badly fed, I should be ashamed of writing of what I feel to be a betrayal of hospitality and generosity the like of which I shall never forget. But when one comes to reflect that men, from whom the greatest physical demand is made, are fed and even reared in this way, their sudden illnesses and short-delayed deaths become explained. I have known men, subject to all weather conditions, go from morning till evening on a bread-and-butter pudding, and the evening meal was often a question of whether you wanted any. 'Ay, ol' Tony an' Ned went all of a sudden an' I be thinkin' fro' the looks of Ted as 'ow 'e won't be long. You watch 'ow 'e stoops as 'e goes along, an' that there cough which keeps a troublin' 'im.' A few weeks before, Ted had looked strong and weather-beaten, but he went very suddenly, just like his brothers. In a crisis my friends have nothing to fall back on. They look sunburnt and are often strong, but they are constantly suffering from chaps and chilblains—signs of more than mere exposure, and they are often wondering why they 'suffers that there terrible from the flatulence.' From

infancy they have been subject to this inefficient and one-sided diet; there is not even a good foundation except in the refining processes of nature and open air. I have often longed to see the herds of black goats nibbling the herbage of our hedgerows as I have seen them, the peasants' property, on the lower and northern slopes of the Pyrenees. Skimmed milk and tinned milk are not enough for our cottage children. The countryman bends to the elements all too young. More sap might keep the old tree straight for many a year longer. It is what is under the bark that tells: the elm looks very sturdy till he is snapped off in his pride like a carrot.

Why grumble at the size of the living-room when we have a parlour like this? Because family life centres round the kitchen fire and not here. We cannot carry our meals into 'the stuffed bird parlour'; and if we could, our filthy boots and stained clothes would make the wife's one pride unfit to receive the yearly visitors from town on August Bank Holiday, or the occasional parish caller. It is the one place where the mother can store her 'best things'—the few wedding gifts, the only carpet,

the chairs in shiny Dutch cloth. It is the one place where the crawling infants are not allowed to upset things. There is a real use in the maligned parlour, and I will always fight for it. Though it is rarely used, it gives the same good bracing effect to the mind such as one gains by dressing for dinner! Moreover, there are vases here for the scrubby bunches of wild flowers which the children bring in for their mother, and they are very often full. Possibly there is the terrible harmonium here too; anyhow, the sound gives us pleasure and it is some relaxation. We do not sit in the parlour more often partly because there are three doors, two windows, and a fireplace to the apartment. At times I have wished the air more evenly distributed over the cottage.

This door leads you straight to the wooden stairway, but ‘mind your napper as you goes up,’ for there is a protruding beam at the top which has knocked me dizzy hundreds of times, even though I knew of its existence well. Ah! I love the creaking of the stairs—it reminds me of my friend going down at five; and that loose board in the passage too, which

always used to tell me when he had lit the candle and crept along 'to see the kiddies be sleepin' all right,' about the time of the 'turning over' of the world. No doubt this was one of the cottage lights that had puzzled me from my heights on the Windrakes. Here in the passage is our chest of drawers; we all share it, and for the rest, use nails on the bare damp walls. There is one proper bedroom—Perrin and his wife's. There is room for a double bed and a washstand. In a cottage with two bedrooms another bed would be added and the room would be shared by the growing girls of the family. The other bedrooms are little more than cupboards. One just held a bachelor's bed and a cot; there was no room for anything more, and the rain and wind beat straight in on to the bed. The other, my room, which opened dangerously right on to the staircase, held a bed, a washstand, and a chair. With all this furniture, I found it necessary to perform most of my dressing in a crouching position on the bed. One day a fatal curiosity seized me to know the size of the room. The first thing I laid hands on was the flannel collar that went

round my neck. It went just five times across the room, six times along it, and six times from floor to ceiling. I have known two grown-up people and a child to sleep in this space. In one cottage bedroom I was forced to stand in one side of my portmanteau while I unpacked the other! Eventually I took to a sugar box as being less bulky and more convenient. It is very difficult in the country cottage to get any quiet or seclusion, or place to call one's own, and as the family grows up this becomes increasingly embarrassing if sons and daughters want to stay on the land. It becomes so stuffy indoors that it is a relief to walk round the village.

The 'real bad cottages' are so numerous that they are unavoidable—though on big estates they are usually off the high road! But for the most part they are so attractive externally that one is almost impelled to knock and seek entry. It would be possible to say a great deal about such cottages. The inhabitants themselves usually say so little; they are well accustomed to them, and moreover they are justly afraid of being turned out—of having to quit their village or pay a higher rent after

improvements or alterations. I knew one cottage where the renewal of a couple of panes of glass was made the occasion for raising the rent 6*d.* a week. Cottage rents have risen almost everywhere. One must expect the paper to hang in festoons or to peel off the sweating walls altogether, and the paint and white-wash to be buried years ago. There is no doubt that the countryman cannot afford to pay large rents, and consequently the landlord cannot be expected to make large outlays. But a cottage ought at least to be water and wind tight. ‘Ay, there be four walls and a bit o’ a roof’—one knows what this means: occasionally the villager is more sarcastic when the roof entirely ceases to serve its purpose and the walls refuse even to be partitions. There are a number of cottages inhabited like this, where the rain is caught by buckets as it trickles through the bedroom ceilings. The roofs are often delightfully picturesque. ‘You could nigh on get a crop o’ hay off on it,’ soliloquised a villager as we stood looking at such a cottage. In the same village stands, or leans, another row of four cottages where family seclusion is no longer possible. The occupants live in

constant communication with their neighbours on either side. 'If you was to put a couple o' pigs in the firs' parlour and their grub in the las', you could 'ave a rare good steeplechase right down the lot a-through the walls.' The inhabitants told me they would rather live like that than have to pay a higher rent. The tale of congestion is even worse; from many parts of England comes the same story. I could vary the description of inconvenience and insanitariness, as I have seen it with my own eyes, over many a long page, but I am ashamed of the squalor and discomfort so largely hidden yet so widely distributed over the face of the motherland. I am inclined to draw a veil over these frightful hovels, as Nature does, concealing them in a bower of blossom and leaf, supporting the shaky walls and roofs as best she can, and at least endowing them with a wonderful legacy of line and tint. The very sight of the cottage beautiful, which is still the cottage coveted of those who live on exteriors and journey past with the artistic eye, fills me with misgiving.

I am not putting in a special plea for those rows of hideous and shoddy brick dwellings savouring of the worst and greyest slum of the

modern town, which are creeping very slowly and grudgingly into the spaces left ruinous by walls that the damp and frost have finally laid low in their senile beauty. Even this hideousness can give one pleasure where it suggests a measure of comfort and convenience for the countryman, but usually this type of dwelling has not even that saving grace for its inmates. The reluctant, and perhaps depleted, landlord forced to build by a local authority which occasionally shows independence and proves stronger than the big man, or the speculative builder, who sees his chance in the raging famine for cottages, does not consider even in a small way the primary needs of their future tenants. The great object is to run up a cottage of some sort at the cheapest possible rate. The result is an inferior type of dwelling planned for suburban or slum requirements, but wholly unfitted for the countryman who wants to store his winter faggots, his potatoes, his onions, his garden seeds, his poultry food, his eggs in lime and salt, and possibly even his own sack of corn. Cupboard room for the home-made jam, pickles, and bottled berries when fruit is cheap, a shelf for

the apples off the old Blenheim or 'Jew's hand,' a hole for the cask of rhubarb beer or parsnip wine, there is none. A glance up into the ceiling will show a little of what we need to store: we even hang marrows there, and find they keep 'till past Christmas, when greens be scarce.'

In the country we are bound to accumulate things: even the poorest of us should always be 'provisioning' when things are plentiful and to our hand against the sieges of our enemies—winter, wet-time, and out-of-work. It used to be our privilege that we had no 'corner shop' where we could buy penny-worths of scabby apples, foreign eggs, cheap jam with wooden pips, or neat bundles of firelighters. The old type of village shop, combined with post-office, was a very different and delightful place. There were great jars, like those concealing Ali Baba's thieves, full of tea, brown sugar, and raisins, good honest sides of bacon and wholesome cheese, local fruit and potatoes. It was a place where one could buy and bargain, even barter and exchange; the happy hunting-ground of myriad wasps, the general chatting place of village gossips; and did not the bottles of real

bull'seyes and twisted barley-sugar sticks attract little knots of children to and fro from school ! Now the speculating tradesman of the nearest town is sending his travelling van to offer the countryman 'cheap luxuries' at the cottage door. We do not want these things which are being pushed on us, but we buy them and we are forced to use them. If we must give up our independence to the penny packet machine-made goods, at least we might do it to our own benefit and make ourselves independent in another line. At least we will have our own co-operative store or van ; for some things it is already a crying need, but there is much that we countryfolk can still do for ourselves so much better than can the manufacturer. The countryman has been moulded in his own castle, however tiny, even from the days of villeinage. It is this dependence on supplying his own needs with good simple stuff, and on storing and husbanding it, which has given him so many fine qualities and a rare position on the earth. Moreover, it gives us a real joy and satisfaction in a life of hard toil and much monotony, yet both 'sweet things.' We like to collect our own faggots,

where we still have the right. It is a contribution of 'the wife and nippers' to the household store. There is a subtle beauty in the curling grey smoke from our own wood beyond the soothing influence of any tobacco: there is a pungent smell of freedom in the air equal to the fragrance of the living tree. We prefer our jams made by 'the mother' and from good fruit. 'I reckons as it tastes better than any stuff you can buy, and it on'y costes we 2*d.* a pound all told.' 'Why, mother, there be enough taters to last we right along till Christmas; they be the best lot as we've growed yet.' 'Ah! that's 'cos I placed the spuds for 'e, Dad, as you digged!' replied his 'missus.' Or perhaps it will be the hens. 'I reckons as the 'ens be laying well—fifteen eggs in three days—why, it's over a bob's worth!' Oh, there is a keen joy in this, even though we have only six hens. It is most satisfactory to look into the round pan of salt and lime, and know, 'when eggs be dear,' that we can draw them out with care one by one: these are better than the guaranteed 'best breakfast eggs,' even though some people wrongly accuse them of being musty! We countrymen are the better

for all this, and if we were not so cramped and hedged in we could do a lot more of this sort of thing. People do not realise the value of room to us—cottage room, garden room, and a few small privileges. Suppose we all had a quarter of an acre of garden at least, and an outshed—most of us have nothing like this: I have been assured over and over again by men that they would willingly pay another shilling at least on rent. It would be worth it to them. Many more of us, too, would remain in the country from the sheer pleasure of burning the fragrant home-culled faggot in preference to chopped-up orange cases from Seville. It is this sense of home, this real active co-operation of family life, which is so expansive. Time was when we did much more and lived more largely off our own and the common rights; and, if I am not dreaming, the time will come again. For the most part our common rights have gone, and with them many of the little advantages which made us freemen of the land. Travers, as pictured in the medieval story, had his flich of bacon hanging in his chimney, and though the police organisation was somewhat faulty, so that he experienced

much difficulty in establishing a right to his own property, he was a free countryman in full possession of his wits and resource. There is a simplicity, a living according to the great mother's rule of life in the country cottage which, but for the material crampedness and ugliness, approaches an ideal life. With many a smallholder this ideal is fully realised, the gold in the grain is treasured. It might be made much more possible, too, for the labourer.

To live near the heart of the great mother, and according to her rule of life, is our more than ample compensation for rejecting the more obvious call to success in a town life; but we are being robbed of this. Our individuality and independence tell us to remain on the land where we were born, and it is not only the dull and less adventurous of us who stay behind; but we are being numbered like those who have buried their individuality in one of the myriad streetlets of the great town. Our initiative in the home is being circumscribed by the same uniformity. We are coming to rely on others for our sources of supply and relaxation, and we are getting further from the heart of Earth Mother. In

so far as this is happening, it is happening to the detriment of our characters as countrymen. Whilst we must welcome and admit the progress of science and economy into country life and industry, still we must fight against that ever-looming, ever-dreaded tendency of modern life to become uniform. If only we can stamp ourselves with an individual commercial success, and retain our liberty and simplicity! It is our pride as countrymen that each little one of us is somebody. Every field and 'pightle' has its name; each gate, each bend in the road its title or tradition. I remember once passing through a village with which I was unfamiliar, and on the outskirts I came up with a small boy vainly endeavouring with shouting and gesticulations to guide an unbridled horse down the road. He was much too diminutive to reach the vulnerable spot—the forelock—so I managed to secure this, and then asked him where the horse was to go. He looked at me rather curiously. I suppose he expected me to recognise the horse! Then he answered, 'Smith's Gate.' 'But where's that?' I answered. 'You must come and show me the way.' 'Wot!

don't you know Tom Smith wot lives at Crook's Corner?' he almost gasped. I felt my confession of ignorance must have been appalling! I learned afterwards that the village largely consisted of Smith's, and that there were two Toms!

Here and there are new cottages picturesquely built for the lodge- or game-keepers on the great estate, but only too often are the inhabitants made to suffer for the artistic sloping roofs and tiny windows. When one has no choice of bedrooms, gables and eaves are often a picturesque cruelty by every inch of height and light and air of which they deprive human beings. The builders rarely put themselves in the place of those who dwell inside, or consider their wants: they sanction things which, if they came to interfere with their own daily lives and comforts, they would find unbearable. As every inch of space is reduced, these details become more insupportable—windows made never to open, or, in tiny rooms, occupying the only wall space where a bed can be placed; rooms with innumerable doors, doors below the level, lack of sink or copper. . . . As the complications or distractions of life are eliminated certain items become much more indispens-

able. I once shared a very good modern 'estate cottage,' convenient inwardly, picturesque outwardly. Not until the first dry summer did I discover that its water supply consisted in one small rainwater tank. Life is so simple in the cottage, and work so hard and often dirty, that we need plenty of water. We drink it, too. In the big house they are strenuous advocates of temperance for the working classes in theory. The situation became complicated. My 'morning tub'—a distinctly necessary item after a day's manual labour—became a real difficulty, and I eventually discovered that I was drinking my own soapsuds regularly for supper. After a few days I gave up my tub! Of course all the family were in the same plight. As I write I am within half a mile of an unspoiled hill village where stand four beautifully designed modern cottages. Though there are men who come several miles to work, these cottages have stood empty for years because the landlord, for his pretty yet utterly inconvenient dwellings, asks the fancy rent of 8s. and 10s. a week. The average wage locally is about 15s. I almost prefer the frank landlord who confessed his whim openly and refused

to build any more cottages—though the demand was great and the villagers migrating—because he ‘didn’t want the village to grow.’

There is a class of person, too, who, unsatisfied with his own choice of life, comes and bids high for the countryman’s cottage. The light-hearted seekers and converters of the country cottage, where they plan to spend a few weeks each year picturesquely playing at village life, are driving the villager from his home and raising the price of his food. In one small village alone I know of ten such week-end homes. The cry for cottages has gone up for years. Young men turn their backs reluctantly on districts full of peace and promise because there is no room for them. I know villages where there are forty applications for six phantom cottages, and ten willing tenants when one fell vacant. ‘This two year agone poor ol’ Jack and Ned ’av been waitin’ to get married, but there don’t seem no prospect of a cottage.’ We sit by while men tramp weary miles to and fro to work, while two or three families share a single cottage, while married couples have to return to their parents and live apart, while brothers and sisters are herded together like

cattle, and while old folk are turned from their homes. 'Time was,' said an aged villager to me as he sat in the parlour window of his four-roomed cottage looking down the main village street—'time was, forty year ago, w'en I paid no more than eighteen pence a week for this 'ere cottage; now I bes old, I be payin' 4s. 6d., and wages aint ris' likewise. Every time as the landlord comes down 'e says as 'e may be havin' to raise the rents. Well, if I 'as to leave the cottage, I 'll 'av to leave the village, though I were born 'ere an' lived forty year in this 'ouse—there baint no other cottage empty, and I knows as there be a party from the town as be a'ter my cottage. 'E comed a-knocking at the door one day, and asked me if he might look inside; 'e said as 'ow 'e liked them di'mond winder panes, as 'e called 'em. So I 'm thinkin' I 'll have to pay more rent or go. Yer see the mother's gettin' ol' too. Neither on us can earn much now, an' if it wasn't for Jim as be gone to the town we couldna' stay 'ere. But 'e be doin' well, though 'e aint forgot the ol' 'ome like. "Well, dad," he says, "if I can 'elp it you shan't be turned out. You an' mother shall die in the ol' 'ome.'"

CHAPTER IV

THE GANG

THE neighbouring market town had a church tower with mellow chimes. On still days and when the wind was in the right direction the sound of the bells carried far across the valley; it seemed second nature to the men at their work on the land to accompany the slow notes by whistling or humming in time together.

This was my first impression of 'the gang' when I joined it on a sharp spring morning, an impression of rhythm, harmony, content. As eighteen men worked side by side up some eighteen rows of beans there seemed a wonderful unanimity of action. There were young men in 'the gang,' men in their prime, and a few just past their prime. Yet they ended almost to a stroke. And the bells would chime the hours and 'the gang' hum with them. There was mystery, too, at first in what I called

the gang's 'love of ritual'—ritual over tools, ritual over rows: the eighteen hoes seemed much the same to me until I knew how to use one; the complete 'right wheel' at the end of every eighteen rows and the claiming of 'my row' and 'Bill's row' seemed a complicated and prolonged manoeuvre until I discovered the unpleasantness of a 'tree row.' The custom of each man having his mate (the man with whom he shared the hoeing or digging of a row or 'land') struck me as like the dreamed-of colonies in Mannahatta, where the prophet of democracy was building settlements of 'comrades.'

But I want to describe the gang as it is: one always clings to early impressions when later realities are not so ideal. Yet in the same spirit in which I made myself 'one of the gang' that morning, I must plunge straight into the greyness of reality. I gave my reader warning at the outset, in the very title I have chosen. 'The gang': the word is reminiscent of Greek slaves, convicts on Dartmoor, or children of Israel under Pharaoh. I do not wish to imply that the gang actually worked as hard as any of these people, or that they were

driven with a whip, rifle, or scorpion. I cannot imagine my best friends in the gang submitting to any such thing, and the foreman extracted the work through his personality and example, and not by abuse or words, though some foremen resort to the latter. But this is the actual name given to the labourers, in some districts at least, by their employer; and the labourers themselves talk of 'the gang.' It is the way labour is looked upon from both sides, and so it is performed in this spirit. The personal relation between master and men is slight, the personal interest still slighter; there is nothing to foster it; there is an intermediary between them—the foreman—whose position is a difficult and delicate one. 'If it weren't for the wife and kiddies I'd chuck it to-morrow,' a foreman said to me; 'my happiest days were as one of Johnson's gang. Why, we're the very devil, the scum of the earth, we are!' This is how the ablest foreman I have ever met described himself. The foremen have to extract work, they have 'to push.' It was an interesting lesson to work with the gang when the foreman 'led the pace'; and then when he was away, as one of the

men expressed it, 'Us went along all right that time, didn't us? We'd some pushing power along o' we; ol' Charlie can put summat into it!' When 'Charlie' was not there we took things in a more epicurean spirit.

Different districts have their own peculiar word for 'the gang,' 'the side,' or whatever they happen to call the complement of field labour; they have various methods of organising this labour under a 'foreman' or 'bailiff'; but I think the spirit is everywhere much the same. In order to realise fully the position of the agricultural labourer, it is necessary to consider the character of his work. I am a great believer in labour, in labour that tries a man both physically and mentally, and I think it is one cause of the sterling characters which so many of England's manual workers possess, but there is much in the nature of agricultural labour which makes it especially arduous. If there is work to be done, time and weather cannot for a moment be considered; then hours are irregular and long; rain or heat have to be ignored. I should say there is no harder physical labour and certainly none so poorly paid; much of this work is of a kind

to become monotonous, and yet, owing to the regularity of the seasons, the monotony is just not long enough to bring extraordinary proficiency and celerity in any single 'job' for a good number of years. I do not want to belittle the value of agricultural labour, or propose that it has no compensating pleasures. Good agricultural labour needs as much intelligence as any other industry, if not more, for the good labourer is really a knowledgeable man who knows a little about a large number of things. 'Can't anyone dig?' asked an intellectual friend, when I told him that I had 'joined the gang.' As a matter of fact, good digging is a very difficult operation, but my friend had missed the whole point—he had no conception of what the trudge of labour means. I have often wished to impart to him the sensation of looking down a vanishing row over which one has to work with bent back from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M., without change of occupation, possibly, for several weeks, and the sensation of being one of a gang with which one must keep up, however violent may be the craving for a moment's muscular relaxation. One becomes almost

‘unintelligent,’ and there is something to endure. ‘Times when I could o’ cried out for pain,’ an old hand described it. ‘I knows I be tired this mornin’ is no uncommon remark to hear at the beginning of the day. Countrymen when they get old do not have bent backs in order to be picturesque. ‘It’s these ’ere rains as done it,’ an old chap explained to me : ‘it’s fourteen times as I’ve ’ad the rumatiz fevers now.’ I am glad to say his record is the exception.

I have purposely been putting forward the dull side of agricultural labour, not because I do not realise its compensations, for more than one man has told me that he never felt its monotony ; some have told me they enjoyed ‘a good day’s digging’ or ‘hoein’ on the clay,’ and I do myself. But I have far more often heard men say, ‘I don’t much care wot it bes so long as I can get through with it’ ; and I am trying to deal with the gang and the rough and tumble of labour, the democracy of labour—not with the stockman, the shepherd, the thatcher, the ‘cue’ grower, or the accomplished grafter. When a man of active and trained mind comes fresh to it all, he feels

that there is no work which comes nearer to the heart of things. The power of the sun is above, the teeming soil is below; one hoes down a never-ending row in the footsteps of eternal ages; there are long silences, vast monotonies, rotations of life and death—but Bill Brown is working for one week's rent and food and clothing for himself and family; he has been doing so for ten or fifteen years and has never had time to look up or around. Spring and summer come and go with a certain regularity and assurance, but the winter may mean weeks of uncertainty and a considerable time out of work. Brown has worked for the bare necessities of life; it is an existence to make a man selfish and self-centred. Everything centres round his struggle to exist, if possible to rise. 'There be no doubt as to it's bein' the survival of them as is fittest,' one labourer remarked to me. Perhaps Brown's one means of escape is his small holding where he works after hours. It can hardly surprise you if he has little or no intelligent interest in his employer or his employer's farm, especially as he is kept in the dark as to the success or failure of the very crops he has cultivated from

seed-time to harvest, because that is the employer's business and a trade secret !

Follow Bill Brown down that headland there, where the laden plum bough droops across the path. Don't be surprised when he kicks it out of his way and breaks it, scattering the fruit instead of stooping to put it aside. He is having his revenge on the trudge of years, he is only one of the gang ; yet he has a good ' boss ' who finds him work whenever possible through the winter. But there is no personal influence in Brown's life, he has no responsibility on the farm, there is no social life in his village, his home life is mostly a makeshift : and this is the atmosphere in which his father and grandfather grew up. After a hard struggle I came to know Brown pretty well : he was a reserved, suspicious man. It was Bill Brown who offered to lend me his bicycle and walk home three miles on one occasion when mine was punctured. He was a big heavy man, always ready for his tea or a glass of ' nut brown,' and he had a holding to work on, so it was no mean sacrifice ; but I thought I would test him. ' Right you are,' I replied, ' if you 'll let me pay for it.' ' Then you 'd best be walking,' was his only comment.

So I walked ; but we have exchanged many favours since then. Brown is a good fellow, but not the exception in the gang. I have always been grateful to the person who maliciously punctured my tyre that day. It was no uncommon thing for the gang to play such tricks on each other. I had become intimate with four or five of the men, I had worked on their allotments with them, dug 'spuds' with them, hoed 'beens' with them—and we had sometimes talked of things that mattered. Now all these men came to help me in different ways, with puncture outfits and so on : one offered to stay behind and mend my tyre for me. After my experience with Brown it was irresistible to tempt him too, so I gave him money. He returned it with, 'I don't want that, I've often had your bike to ride afore this, as you knows, and if I can't mend it for nothin' you'd better mend it yerself, my time don't matter ; of course I've time.' This small incident showed me another side of the gang's character. These men and their moods need understanding, and I cannot refrain from giving another example of their better side as a farmer told it to me. 'Now last winter there was a chap who was

out of work, so I found him a job just to keep him going. Well, could you believe it, in the spring when we got busy he chucked us over because he was offered a bit more money. Well, that chap had some good in him. D'you know, one day the missus had packed him up a good plate of roast beef and vegetables, and just as he came to the door to fetch it, up came one of those wretched looking traveller chaps. Well, Sam, he handed it all over to the other fellow, and when the missus called him back for some more, he just replied, "No, thank'ee, mum; that's my show; a pipe o' baccy 'll do me a' right," and he lit his clay pipe and off he went.'

But I am beginning to deal with individuals rather than the gang: I have been forced to do so in order to show that there is another side to the picture. I have infinite faith in the gang as individuals and an equal affection for them. It is the gang system that vitiates and demoralises them; it is this unadulterated 'wage relationship.' In the town men have other relationships, such as their unions; the countryman has nothing to fall back on.

Life is divided into the time a man is hired and the time he is free, and every act of the

day seems coloured by this outlook. I often arrived early at the 'hovel' where the gang collects to receive orders and start out for the day; on several occasions a single man has turned up five or ten minutes before six, the time for starting work. The fact was always commented on when the rest of the gang arrived. 'Ullo, this 'll never do. We'll be a-startin' work afore six if you keeps this up. It's time enough to get 'ere when the 'ooter goes.' On one occasion Brown arrived only to find me in the hovel; 'Hullo, somethin' must 'a 'appened this mornin',' and he pulled out his watch: 'I always reckons to be at the top of yonder bank as the hooter goes six, and that 's a good four minutes yet.' Another morning the foreman came in a minute or two before six to fetch a tool; the gang thought he had come to start work, so one pulled out his watch with, 'There 's a good minute yet afore six,' and the others murmured approval. There is not the same feeling about starting late, or wasting time, and as the hooter goes 6 P.M. the men clear off the ground to the instant, unless there is overtime. Some farmers make their men lose half an hour's pay if they are three minutes late.

I was 'setting out plants' one day with the gang, and one of my best friends and 'another chap' were 'feeding' the planters with seedings, and they finished their job before the rest of us. 'Wot 'ad us best do, Bill?' asked the other man of my friend; 'Do? I baint goin' to do nothin'. We'm paid to do as we're told: we'm told to do this 'ere and till I'm told to do summat else I shan't do it.' The foreman was not on the spot, and they wasted the best part of an hour. In the matter of hoeing and digging I discovered there was something more in the gang's uniformity of action than the picturesque harmony I supposed. Some men are better workers than others, but if one gets in front, the others begin to bully, and shy stones and mud. 'I knows well enough wot be goin' on,' the foreman said to me, 'but it's very 'ard for me to say anythin'. If I works along of 'em they keeps up for very shame, but as a rule bad labour keeps back good. I likes to see a bit o' competition and keenness among the men, but it's all gone, and they tips one another the wink to go slow.'

The gang are very like overgrown schoolboys in their relation to the boss, to each other,

and to their work. Many a time have I been resting on my hoe at the end of a row with the gang, when one would call out, 'Boss comin'!' and they all started to work furiously. It is very reminiscent of 'Cave! The Head!' On several occasions when in charge of labour, I have unwittingly surprised a group of men talking. As soon as they saw me they started working at a rate which it would be impossible for any man to keep up for five minutes, let alone a day. I have never been able to forget one absurd situation. I was raspberry-picking with the gang one afternoon when we had been surprised with an order for so many hundred 'chips' for an early train; so we had to pick against time. Brown and another man had just finished their row and had strolled down a half-picked row to talk with the other men, when the boss appeared with a basket and joined me in picking. Brown and his mate evidently felt 'fairly copped.' So for half an hour these two fully grown men pretended to pick raspberries off a row that was stripped, and to make their acting realistic, they filled their baskets with green berries which were chucked away as soon as the boss's back was turned.

There is a huge misunderstanding between employer and employed: the whole relationship has become distorted: human considerations have been ignored, though both boss and gang are intensely human individually. There is the fear of being caught resting or talking; there is the grudging of doing more than one is paid to do; there is, worst of all, that total absence of interest in the concern to which the men are giving their lives and labour. There is the reticence of the boss and his determination to 'get all he can.' There are some farmers who will extract the uttermost from their men. I have known them to assert that if a man is 'earning his wage,' he should be too tired to work an allotment or put in overtime.

I was standing with the 'boss' at the hovel door one morning when ten degrees of frost had nipped the plum blossom, and the promise of 160 acres of plenty was turned into wholesale loss and disappointment. 'Lovely mornin', sir,' was the cheery greeting of one of the labourers. It is hardly to be wondered at if the 'boss' answered rather sharply. By themselves, the gang enjoyed the joke and agreed 'it didn't much matter to we about the plums,' in the

same spirit in which a man philosophised, 'Well, 'e'll give us no more trouble,' when he tripped over a tomato stem.

'Things were very different fifty year ago,' a veteran fruit-grower remarked to me. 'When I was first an apprentice, we were up with the sun and none of us thought of leaving till after it had gone down. I remember the long summer evenings: the old foreman was a fine chap and a great believer in the sun; he used to keep at it until the last ray of sun was just on a level with the top of the old cob wall, and then he would call out, "Now, my lads, on with the lights and bottle up that last ray of sunlight"; that was always the last thing before we went home. Of course our master was a fine type of man, a squire of the old sort, who saw we never lacked for anything. I suppose it's what they'd call philanthropy nowadays: coal and blankets and turkeys and Christmas puddings; but he took an interest, and I reckon there was a much better feeling, and he didn't interfere with our religion or politics. I've often thought it over myself and considered trying a bonus or co-partnership system, so as to get the men interested: it would be worth

anything. Give them a bonus on a successful crop, and so on, and they'd put in more time and energy. Things are very different now.' I could not help recalling another occasion when I had walked round some gooseberry plantations with a grower. There was a keen demand for green berries at the moment, and the man wanted to strip his bushes. As we reached a group of pickers a woman, who had worked long and well for the farm, came forward to say she was sorry she couldn't come to-morrow as her daughter was being married, and might she leave an hour early to-day 'to see the pudding was well boiled' for the feast? The grower remarked that it was very tiresome, as he had so many orders to satisfy: not a sign of interest, not a word of good wishes to an old servant: the festivity interfered with his routine!

There are two other questions in relation to the gang which have a great influence on their work: the one is piecework, the other small holdings.

'Things always go all right until it's piecework, and then all the trouble and nastiness begins. I go about that miserable when piece-

work's on, for then every one's against every one else. It's not so much what the chaps says or does as the way they says and does it as beats me; it's real nasty.' This is a foreman's opinion. 'S'pose the boss'll try and 'ave us over that there bit o' 'oein'. If he don't give us a fair price, well, I just stops away or goes somewhere else.' This is the gang's point of view. The only time I have had any unpleasantness with a countryman was when I was paying for piecework. 'I'm not going to pay men by the day, not if I know it, unless I want very special care taken. I'm going to pay a chap for what he does.' This is a prosperous grower's view. I have watched the gang's manœuvres at piecework: they start a bit of hoeing, then all 'down tools,' and along comes one of them to the foreman. Here is the sort of conversation that follows. 'Hullo, Bill! What d' you want?' 'Can't do that there 'oein' at the price.' 'It's no worse than the last bit you did.' 'Never saw such dirty groun'; can't do it at the price unless we 'oes up them cabbages too.' 'What! and lose the crop?' 'Can't help that.' 'Well, you are a lot o' chaps for grumbling, you

are.' 'Don't know about that; must make our money somehow; come and see for yersel'—and so on. Of course the quality of piecework is proverbial: 'A man hoes two rows with his feet, one with his hoe!' Piecework always has to be closely inspected, and possibly the men are sent back to do it again. I know a farmer who one day met one of his men going home early in the afternoon—they were on piecework. 'Hullo, Bill! You're chucking work early to-day then—something on at home?' asked my friend. 'Noa,' was the reply; 'but I be gettin' on a bit too fast.' 'What! can't you do with an extra shilling or two, then?' returned the farmer; and he met with this curious reply, which illustrates so well the misunderstanding, 'Ay, but I thought as I might be earnin' a bit too much money for your likin'.' I am fully conscious that, while relationships remain like this, piecework is essential if we are to make a commercial success of things. I know, too, that while wages are low, piecework gives the men a chance of earning better money. They do get through more work, yet I deplore the state of affairs which has made us resort to it.

The small holding question in some districts is a difficult one. 'It isn't as if the boss and I didn't try to find the chaps work right through the winter and wet time; we rarely turns any-one away. But there's never no gratitude for it, but when the day comes and the boss wants every man he can get to give a hand with the planting or picking, half the chaps stops away on their own groun' without giving any warning, and the boss is left in the lurch. I say as a man as is working for a boss shouldn't take up more land than he can manage of an evening—an acre at most, I say.' The foreman summed up the position in these words. The 'boss' said things had really come to such a pass that 'something must be done.' Of course the foreman has a position and a fairly good wage; the men's point of view is almost too obvious to need enlarging on. The whole level of wages is low. Men have no capital on which to start their holdings, unless they work for a boss, and they have no means of raising or borrowing money, capacity and honesty being their only securities. Their holdings are their one hope of prosperity and independence. They are forced to serve two masters: it is human nature to work best

on one's own holding. I once discussed the question of starting a co-operative market for the smallholders of a district with a big farmer who had a fine knowledge of markets. 'I don't think it would be a success,' he said: 'a chap wants to know his markets.' 'But surely we could get a chap who understands markets to run it,' I replied. He laughed. 'You see there are things a chap would do for himself and wouldn't go to the trouble of doing for other people. If I weren't selling my own things I could never go to all the bother.'

One night I sat over the fire with two experienced foremen and talked the matter out. They were both certain of one thing—that gang work as it existed was bad. 'It's just that little word wot you mentioned just now, sir, "interest"; if only we could get the men to take interest they'd be worth any wage. D'you know, if our chaps took an interest in the place I could work it with just half the number or take on a double lot of land. If only a man would put all he knows into it, I'd give him 20s. or even 30s. a week, and the boss would say nothing. But there's no energy, no enthusiasm in it, and they don't try to make 'emselves a bit better for their

job.' 'It's all very well for you two chaps to talk like this,' I answered, 'but you've got an interest in the place because the boss tells you things and you are drawing a decent wage.' 'I believes you're on the right track in a way, Mr. Holdenby,' replied the foreman, 'though I will say as I believes there's chaps as never will take an interest in nothing, whatever you may do. But I tell you what I be doin' at this moment: the boss 'e says to me, "Jim, you do just as you minds with the men"; so I be dividin' our place up into lots of ten-, fifteen-, or twenty-acre grounds, and I've picked out a chap for each ground, with two or three under him, and he's responsible to me and me to the boss. I believes it's the only real way to work it, and if it turns out well I'm willin' to give 'em any wage within reason. But, mind you, I be certain of this: it's the chap that makes himself a bit scientific nowadays and keeps along of the times as is going to make a success of things and be worth 'is money. It's because I saw this thirty year ago as a butcher's lad that I'm foreman 'ere now. We were just a bit keener than the rest on 'em.'

CHAPTER V

A KNOWLEDGABLE SORT OF CHAP

‘ You ’LL find him a knowledgable sort of chap ; I always consult him if I ’m in doubt about things,’ said my farmer friend to me the day he departed for his holiday.

Old Walker gave a very different account of himself a few days later when I gave him the wage book to sign. ‘ Where is it I puts my mark, please sir ? I baint much of a scholard : we didn’t learn much in my day ; I can’t neither read nor write so I always ’as to make my mark ; ’ and he handed me back the book with a very shaky cross in the margin. ‘ That doesn’t count for everything, Walker,’ I ventured : ‘ after a few days’ writing in the estate office I often wish I couldn’t write ! ’ ‘ Ay, but I guess it’s fine to be a scholard, don’t you, Jack ? ’ he replied, turning to his mate. ‘ I ’d like to be able to understand things a bit and talk

about 'em; it's nice to be edicated, and 'ave the way o' talking like. Now this 'ere Insurince Bill, sir—I s'pose you understands just all about it. Now me and Jack 'ere we can't make 'ead nor tail on it; so we agrees we 'll do what other folk does, don't us, Jack?' 'Ay, ay,' replied Jack Woodward; 'in the way 'o votin' like, I jus' follows the rest on 'em. I s'pose it's about the same party as passed them ol' age penshins, isn't it, sir?'—'Ay, ay, I thought so: then I reckon them's the chaps to vote for; but the Squire, 'e goes t'other way like, and 'e ought to know.'

During my agency at the farm I was constantly asking Walker's advice, yet he always maintained his humble attitude of mind—not humble in a servile sense, but he always seemed to feel his lack of 'edication,' and it was very difficult to make him see that he had compensations far outweighing his loss of book learning. I think, too, that the high hills and mysterious beech woods had unconsciously become part of his being, and that he half realised there were great beyonds which he had not the power to penetrate. In any case he lived very much in harmony with his surround-

ings, and he accepted hard work and low wages without question; yet he had a keen perception of natural forces and an equally keen interest, though he was no longer a young man. He had always views on the weather prospects, the condition of the soil, the progress of the seed.

Walker's great speciality was the rick-yard and all that pertained to it from seed-time to threshing. He was the best man for building a hayrick, and from the direction of the wind he could tell almost to an inch how much it would sink. In cutting up a rick his trusses, too, were wonderfully accurate in size and weight. It was a pleasure to see him handle the cut grass to test its readiness for carrying; he touched and smelt and judged of its colour as a connoisseur would select his cigar, and when at last the hay was carried, he seemed to take a special delight in feeling the ferment rise. He was equally 'knowledgable' at seed-time: he always knew if the tilth were good or the soil a bit too 'dummel'; he 'broadcast' with a wonderful evenness and sweep of the hand; he was equally at home in adjusting the coulter of the drill or the brushes of the

seed-barrow to a nicety. But all this is recognised as 'unskilled' labour for the 'uneducated' countryman, who in reality can only know his job well after years of experience and observation. Unlike any other industry, agriculture is almost entirely dependent on the seasons, and no two seasons are alike. The work of the good labourer is not mechanical: he has to use judgment, memory, and patience—though he is neither estimated nor paid accordingly; with the result that the Walkers and Woodwards are not so common as formerly in the country. The labourer is only too often the man who has left the country for the town, and having failed there, returns where labour is more scarce and where the employer cannot afford to be critical.

Walker's intimacy with the elemental things of life—the soil, the seed, the beginnings of life, maturity, harvest—had given him a sense of proportion which I think kept him contented. His thoughts were always living in cycles of years and rotations; he talked of how 'them seeds chitted four year agoone after lyin' in the groun' a three week and near malting,' or of how 'that there dressing of slag three

year back do 'elp the Dutch clover.' This is the education the countryman needs, and my farmer friend knew what he meant when he described Walker as a 'knowledgable chap.' I suppose if Walker had made the world hideous by delving for coal or diamonds, or by adding to the smoke of the factory chimneys, he would have been paid more than 14s. a week, he would have been housed decently and given an eight-hour day; but because he is adding to the world's beauty, because his labour is slow with the seasons and his craft acquired through the cycle of ages he is at a discount, even though economists have tried to exalt his produce—wheat—to the level of gold.

Men may say, too, that the countryman works under such pleasant conditions—in the sunlight and fresh air—that he does not merit the wages of our factory hands or those who work below ground. But as a rule these folk have their mates, they are not alone; whereas my friends, if they are not on gang labour, may spend whole days by themselves. They take their lunch lonely under the hedge and trudge home lonely at night, and see not a

living soul all day. True, if you see two countrymen going homeward in the setting sun they are mostly silent; but there is a vast strength in silent companionship, and one man gives the pace to the other, and they are the sooner home. Several times I have set a man on a job by himself, and met with the suggestion, 'All right, sir, but if I could 'ave a mate we 'd get through it a deal quicker.' They are not far wrong, and now I always try to give every man a mate. 'Be able to be alone. Loose not the advantage of solitude, and the society of thyself, nor be only content, but delight to be alone and single with Omnipresency,' says Sir Thomas Browne. It is a great maxim for the man who is conscious of the Presence. I think many of the fine qualities of my field friends are the result of an unconscious absorption of this solitude of which they have so much; but they need rather to be led to find the omnipresency in man too. Many a time have I passed fields or crossed some hill when my eyes lit upon some solitary worker; not only the reapers' 'plaintive numbers,' but

The music in my heart I bore

of those silent folk who have so often appealed to me. I have great affection for a shepherd friend, and every day I used to seek him out to work or chat with him, and at night we would walk home together. He used to ask for company, and one evening he remarked on it: 'I don't think I've ever seen quite so much of a chap afore; I likes it.' Sometimes when one is very busy it becomes quite impossible to get round the farm in the day. Perhaps next day I have completed my rounds and here and there looked up folk working on outlying fields by themselves. More than once I have been greeted with, 'Thought as you'd forgotten us altogether,' or 'I'm thinkin' it was about time you came an' 'ad a word with us again.' I remember one woman talking to me of working alone, and begging me to send her along with the other women. 'It ain't that one's actually frightened o' anythink, but being lonesome a lot one gets afraid o' oneself like.'

The slowness of the countryman, which people talk about, is in reality a virtue when it is not the slowness of sloth; even science when she turns to investigate Nature becomes

slow. Her workers are forced to choose long periods of years for observation before they are satisfied with their research, before they can give accurately and confidently the life history of one small insect pest. So in a humbler sphere, the true countryman's life is influenced by the same natural laws ; his actions and speech are slow perhaps, and his brain moves by habit and intuition and latent memory ; but he observes and watches ; he has the secret lessons of years behind his silence.

The squire had his own theories of remuneration, about a man being 'paid in accordance with his power to produce wealth,' but he did not even carry out this theory in practice : for the 'estate men' who sweep his paths and mow his lawn and brush his hedges were better paid than the men who raise the golden corn ! Moreover, Walker and Woodward work side by side with two other men, and they draw the same wage. These two have failed in the town and returned to the country where their failure is more hidden and tolerated ; they are shirkers and grumblers, and they have no part with the broad spaces and warm sunlight. I remember on one occasion marking out a bit

of mangolds into four 'lands,' and these four men 'took the job on piecework.' The flat hoeing came first and nothing was said, and they all drew their money; then came the side hoeing or cutting out the superfluous mangolds, and each man returned to the 'land' he had flat hoed. Now, at the time I had not employed men on piecework before, and I did not walk over the ground after the flat hoeing—though every farmer knows that the success of the side hoeing depends largely on the quality of the flat. It was now that the grumbling began, and the two shirkers were full of words about the effect of the rain, the difficulty of 'getting a full plant,' and that it 'couldn't be done at the price.' Walker and Woodward just kept on until they finished their 'lands,' so I walked out across the field to consult Walker, for I never like to beat a man down at piecework. He shifted his hat to the back of his head, leant on his hoe and smiled at me. 'Well, sir, if you asks me wot I thinks, it's this. I don't say nothing agin no one, but as a man does 'is side 'oeing so accordin' is the cuttin' out: if you shirks the first, you'll find it out when you comes

to the cuttin' out. We put a few extry hours in on the one, and so we 'm finished off first on t' other. If you asks me if we 've made good money, I can't say as there 's much in it either way; but a bargain's a bargain, and we takes our risk at this 'ere piecework, and if we agrees on a price we sticks to it.'

This was Walker's spirit all through. He was always willing to give the benefit of his forty years' experience, and was the first to volunteer overtime in a fickle season. If he 'kept at it till it be dark,' of course he had tea from the farm; but he never forgot, 'Please thank the ladies indoors from all on us.'

In his relations with the other men he was always kindly and jovial. He was a bachelor, a fact which the other farm hands were not slow to comment on. 'W'en be ye goin' to get married, Bill? You 'd better 'urry up before it 's too late,' or, 'Ol' Bill, 'e 's afraid o' the women 'e is! 'E knows too much about 'em!' Walker only chuckled and said he had enough to do to look after himself. He did not add that he had an aged mother and sister to support. We had a boy on the farm; his big brown eyes, pale skin, and the jaunty twist of his cap gave away

his origin before he spoke even : when he did, it conjured up the thickness of a London fog and the attendant 'torch boy.' One day I heard him talking to Walker. Walker had a distinct 'mode' of his own, the main characteristic of which was a very weather-beaten bowler hat which he wore all the year round. He rather reminded me of the pictures of Mr. Grimes in 'Waterbabies.' 'D'you know, Mr. Walker, w'en I first comed 'ere and saw that there 'at of yours, I thought as you was the boss, and I was a goin' to touch my cap to yer as if you was a real gennelman.' 'And so I bes, young 'un, only I aint got the cash ; I aint the cash to do it proper, and if I 'ad I don't know as if I would, but I be a real gennelman like the rest on 'em.' 'D' you know what I 'd do, Mr. Walker, if I was a real gennelman ? The first thing I 'd do 'd be to 'ave a real big plate of cold beef and pickles' : and the boy craved so much for the garnished plate-glass windows that he was drawn back to the magnetic city ; but Walker is still 'the real gennelman' without 'the cash' among the beech woods. Yet the town lads have told the country lads of higher wages, shorter hours, and a new

social life, and naturally the best of our country lads are ambitious, and few of them see what Walker saw in the hills and woods.

It was a year or so after this, when I was spending Christmas in a great municipality, that the problem came right home to me. I had got to know old Woodward, Walker's mate, well; I had even stayed in his cottage. He was just such another of the old school, and he made a home for two weakly brothers in his cottage. He was the handy man of the farm, a man invaluable in the country—the repairing of gates, fences, roofs, ploughs, tools, reapers, all came within his ken—but, like the rest of them, he lived out of the whirr and noise of things, and so he was ‘unskilled.’

It was on Christmas Eve that a knock came on my door—a rap with the knuckles, though there were bell and knocker; in a flash I felt myself back in Woodward's cottage in Henton village, and I went and opened the front door myself. There stood old Woodward; his furrowed face, with the white ring of hair surrounding it, was all of a smile. ‘I thought as you'd be surprised to see me 'ere, sir, but as I know'd your address I comed to wish you

good luck of a Christmas Eve.' 'But what on earth are you doing here?' I asked; then, recovering myself, I drew him indoors and we sat down over the fire. 'Well, you see, sir, George and Jim was weakly chaps, and last winter carried 'em both off within a few weeks of each other; so the missus and I talked it over and comed to the conclusion as there was nothin' to keep us in Henton; I 'appened to see as the corparashin 'ere was advertisin' for workmen to lay the new tram lines and offerin' a very good wage, so we sold up our little bit o' stuff and comed into lodgings in 375 Bartholmew Street. Oh, ay, it's a bit strange after Henton, and I think the missus would be back again if it wern't for bein' so comfor'able like; but we can live a deal better and far less worry. . . .'

Even the 'knowledgable chap' can live better in the town, so he migrates there, but the country receives back the dross of navvydom, the restless street loafer and the drunken failure; and crazy theorists continue to cry 'back to the land,' and are surprised when their schemes are failures. To make the earth yield her increase a man must know the land; to the

unkindly hand she becomes barren in a season. Her true son is slow as the seasons, simple as the mould, even as the turf, hard as the oak. He must indeed possess an intuitive knowledge of the soil and her kindliness, of the seed and its unfolding, and of the power of nursing rain and mothering sun. He must note the colour of the ripening wheat and watch the bending of the barley's head. This is the result of an education and a training of many years; it is the slowly acquired experience of the 'knowledgable chap.' It is a long process of assimilation to nature; it is almost a becoming 'one with the world.'

CHAPTER VI

SOME COUNTRY ARTISTS

UP to the present I have attempted only to deal with the democracy of country labour, the ordinary field labourer as we see him hoeing or digging, at plough or harrow, with the seed barrow or on the rick, sowing or laying field pipes. There is much diversity in his work; he is rarely at any of the more specialised operations of farming for very long together, but generally he has acquired the knack and reputation for being 'the man' on the farm for some particular kind of job. 'Ay, Ted's the man for that job,' you may hear them say, as if speaking of some great authority: they do themselves recognise the quality of labour and individual gifts. I recall an amusing instance of a labourer who had lost all sense of smell: to his lot fell the burial rites of any stock that happened to die upon

the farm. The shepherd or pigman would usually announce a death with 'There'll be a job for ol' Joe to-day, sir.' But Joe had more positive gifts, and when we developed a horticultural side to the farm he proved to be the man to direct the job. But as Walker showed, field labour itself calls for talent, though the man who develops in that line has not great opportunities of rising above the general level or of commanding a wage in proportion to his efficiency, unless indeed he becomes a smallholder. Yet how very rarely does one see the mistakes of the field labourer. And how very glaring they would be if he made many. There, for a whole season, would show the irreparable gaps in his sowing or the effects of his bad hoeing. Instead, look at this field of 'hop and Dutch.' The Dutch clover was barrowed, but the hop trefoil was broadcasted. It is wonderfully even all over the field: a fact which should be as pleasant as the incessant humming of the honey bees in the Dutch clover or the sweet fragrance of its bloom. It tells of a regularity and dexterity in the sweep of the hand little appreciated.

The stockman's work is more specialised : the results of his labour are more conspicuous. Just as there is something in the good labourer which seems to suggest to me that he is forever listening, scenting, feeling, intuitively yet acutely, so that he knows just when and how to cultivate the land, so with the good stockman—he develops something very much akin to the animals he tends. He possesses much more than a mere knowledge and accustomedness. He may possess the scientific eye and method, but there is something beyond even this, something no less than the indescribable sympathy of the artist for the source of his inspiration. Though the artist is essentially the inspired man, he has an intimate knowledge of his subject. What phase of the dawns and twilights over the great river managed to escape Turner's eye ? What light of the summer heavens or cloud vagaries escaped Constable ? It is the same with the stockman. He has his moments of real inspiration ; and he possesses, too, a minutely intimate knowledge of the animal life and movement which is his own particular subject. Watch the artist at his canvas. Certain arbitrary movements of the

brush, or combinations of colour, seem to us madness until we see the complete conception. The stockman has no less boldness, no less insight, in mating and selecting his stock. Professor Jacks, in 'Mad Shepherds,' has given us a delightful picture of the creation of a flock by Snarley Bob: "Snarley has found a medium which gives him perfect satisfaction." "Then the poems ought to be in existence," said I. "So they are," was the answer: "they exist in the shape of Farmer Perryman's big rams. The rams are the direct creation of genius working upon appropriate material. None but the dreamer of dreams could have brought them into being; every one of them is an embodied ideal."

Rather would I see in Tandy, my herdsman friend who gave me my initial 'breaking in,' the genius of a great sculptor; he had the same passion for form and line, the same exquisite knowledge and control of his material. For many a week I carried his wash buckets on a yoke over my shoulders, and I am still glad to go back to-day and do menial service to this great master. He is a spare, wiry man, with an eye that never loses sight of his ideal

and a memory which is almost beyond belief. He has that curious reserve of manner yet directness of speech which one only meets with in men of genius who have complete self-confidence and absolute command over their subject. Time is nothing to him; stockbreeding is his hobby. He will spend hours a day studying his creations, seeing if this attitude or that movement may reveal some flaw that must be redeemed 'next litter.' He shows you his herd with a delicacy and pride which is not excelled when the connoisseur of china brings forth his unique piece of salt glaze. It is sheer delight to him. He can quote you pedigrees, and honours, and sales generations back, without reference to a note. 'You might just come and look in No. 31, an' see what you thinks o' my January boar.' He drives him out for inspection and stands looking at me inquiringly. Perhaps it is obvious to me that he 'will be in the money' at the 'Royal.' And Tandy will be delighted. With his hand or stick he will just outline the points, pause at the exceptional qualities, and simply say, 'Beautiful; take some breedin' to get a better, I knows.' Maybe he will show me a

pig as long and thin as a farm gate; he will pause and then interject a 'Well?' inquiringly. 'I can't think what you're going to make of that, Tandy; he'd do for the clothes horse!' I would rashly volunteer; but I have learnt better now. Tandy has given me too many lessons, and he can no longer take me in so badly. He had a quiet, withering smile about him which I knew always meant I had said too much. Then he would simply make some startling assertion, like 'We'll have a champion by him afore the year's out.' Tandy was rarely too optimistic. He had often fought for pigs that his boss had no eye for, and he would be proved right when the sow threw winners. 'Yes, I always did believe in that sow, an' 'ad a fancy for 'er,' he would say with a wag of the head. Sometimes I have known Tandy come across a pig on another farm which was just the thing he wanted to remedy some slight defect in his own herd. Then the characteristics of the artist come out in him again. He must have it: he cannot rest until it is his. He will journey miles to see it. I think Tandy must literally be able to see his young stock growing. He certainly knows

how his stock will 'shape' when they are mature. 'That'll never make a pig, sir; best make pork of 'im,' or 'Don't you worry about 'er; she'll alter won'erful an' be the best gilt in the litter yet.'

This moulding of live flesh for the creation of ideal form and line is only one side of the stockman's art. He is a master in dietary and diagnosis. Watch how he mixes his foods. Nearly every sty has its own proportions. He can feed to a nicety and almost control weight and size. He can force or he can keep back. He can see at a glance the signs of health or sickness. He knows in a minute that 'the heifer baint bright in the eye this morning: she be needin' a drench'; 't'old sow baint over gay'; or 'the maggot be on the lambs.' I have a very vivid recollection of sharing a shepherd's wheeled hut with him during lambing. I took my sleep in snatches, propped on some sacks of cotton cake, while he and his boy lay in their caps, clothes, and boots, dozing on a bare and shaky bedstead. Between times we wiled away the hours there round his little grate, toasting sausages and warming milk, as merry and free in our smoky wooden hut as

any medieval baron and his retainers in his great oak-beamed hall. Then on the still night air would come that peculiar bleat which the shepherd always knows to be the herald of approaching motherhood. This call would wake him through deep snoring, though the call of a ewe to her lamb or the bark of my dog in the hut never roused him. It was as if he were strung up in tune with this one particular note. We would light our crazy lamp and go out into the darkness, following down the call until we found the ewe. Then we came back to our hut. Perhaps we had saved a life, or brought two lambs, that to-morrow would be skipping, into the world. Even in the stifling hut, whence we cannot keep out the sheep ticks, try as we will, there is work for us and romance of its own. An orphan lamb lies with us on the floor, stretched in the warmth, fed by the bottle. We bend over another, a dead lamb, skinning it to make a coat for the living one, and dupe the mother ewe. In a few days the ewe will forget her dead lamb and 'be right mad after' her foster child, and we shall have brought another lamb safely to the tet. Once more the mystery of the

moving midnight lights of the plain are revealed to me ! Often we found lambs that had strayed and lost their mothers ; but the shepherd was never at a loss, and from among his big flock he could single out the mother straight away.

These qualities of the stockman and shepherd are of no common kind. It is not the result of mere routine ; it is first-class genius. I have watched many country lads go under good stockmen, but I have only seen one or two shape into anything like the real stuff. Watch them, both at work and after hours. I know one shepherd lad in the making now. This year he hardly once slept at home or with his clothes off for six weeks. It was not compulsory work, though we gave him a shilling or two extra a week by way of encouragement. ‘ ‘E be a real good lad and deservin’ of it ; an’ no matter what time I wakes ’im, if there’s a job goin’ ’e’s willin’,’ the shepherd would say. Despite his broken nights and hard work, Charlie’s round face and blue eyes were always full of fun. Sometimes he would be ‘that comical and mischieful,’ that the hours passed very pleasantly in the shepherd’s hut. The shepherd had found a lad to carry on his

tradition, and he was like a father to the boy. We do not find it pays us to bring up lambs on the bottle, but rather than they should be killed I have seen Charlie trudging home at early dawn with a weakly lamb under his arm. He found real pleasure in rearing them; indeed, he took a real pleasure in life, and he had always some jest with every one on the farm. There is no doubt he has found his vocation. I have often asked stockmen how they have acquired their intimacy with stock. 'Oh, I always 'ad leanin's that way as a lad,' I am sure to be told; 'I always 'ad leanin's towards pigs and I used to spend my evenin's along with the ol' stockman, an' 'e'd be contented like to talk by the hour.'

Farmers naturally recognise the worth of their stockmen, but they do not always pay them accordingly. The stockman gives his life to his work, he has no Sundays or holidays. A good farmer will compensate him by giving a bonus for every 'double' during lambing and for every litter of pigs, or foal or calf. He may share the prize money with him, and even then he is not doing a bit too much. But I think in a much wider sense these men are not

given their due. The genius of the stockman only appeals directly to a limited public ; his worth is bounded by the limitations of Nature's law. He cannot accelerate its productive power, and yet as stockbreeders we in England stand foremost in the world. There will always be a demand for our pedigree stock. I believe in many countries stock rapidly deteriorates. It may be partly climatic, but it is still more because we have the secret, and also we are fortunate in having as patrons some of our best and wealthiest country gentry and even trade kings. We have much to thank them for, and we look to them in the future to maintain one of our most promising branches of agriculture. Yet the real artist is overshadowed, though perhaps he is none the less happy. Because his intimacy with stock, with the movement and expression of his beasts, have really made him look and grow like the very beasts themselves, we are apt to think him dull and bestial, whereas he is tingling with inspiration for his own particular art. I remember an experience which brought this home to me. I had always thought Fred, the carter, the most uncouth fellow on the farm. He had something of the

step of his mares in his gait, his eye had just their glance, he even spoke in a kind of whinny. One of his team fell ill: the man was night and day with the mare, tending its every whim. Once I came suddenly into the stable and found Fred with her nose in his two hands and his face right up against the beast's cheek. He was talking to it in a kind of soothing undertone, and the mare just 'whimpered' back. His face had a life about it that I had never noted before, there was a sympathy and expression beyond what I had ever imagined, and I knew all at once that Fred was a born carter. I knew how it was that he got the most work from his team with the least resistance, how they obeyed his voice rather than the whip.

CHAPTER VII

‘SQUIRE’ HOBBS

‘Wot, tir, you tome to wort?’—(‘What, sir, you come to work?’)—such was the first greeting I received from ‘Squire’ Hobbs. ‘Well den, you jutt tatch t’ol’ ram for me—Wot! you dunno ’ow to tatch t’ol’ ram? Tatch ’un by t’ leg, man, or ol’ Willum ’ll play wiv ’e.’ Few people can understand what Hobbs has to say; I never regret that I have become one of the privileged few. I drop into his way of speech at once now, but when my ‘boss’ first introduced me to ‘the shepherd’ I thought I had found a new dialect. Despite Hobbs’s cleft palate I came to listen to every word he had to say; but I do not intend to give anyone else the trouble of puzzling out his quaint jabber, though here and there his unforgettable phrases have so stuck in my mind that any

picture of him seems to be utterly incomplete without them ; so if they appear here and there I must ask to be forgiven.

A short, square, unshaven man, with bad teeth, and legs that are not quite straight, in stained and ragged clothes which give a general air of neglect—this is ‘Squire’ Hobbs. Yet now I never get beyond those independent, defiant blue eyes of his. He possesses the strength of a lion, and the same determination to be his own master. I had come to know Hobbs well by the time I entered his cottage, and so the prevailing disorder was a purely secondary consideration. I had always talked to him in the sheep-pen or pigsty, leaning over a gate, or sitting on a stile after dusk, and that was the real ‘Squire’ Hobbs to me ; so when at last I entered his living-room, a dirty, uncomfortable apartment furnished only with wooden benches, a table heaped with used plates, a dresser filled with bottles of lotion and greasy rags, and a newly slaughtered sheep hanging from a nail in the centre beam and dripping blood on to an uneven cement floor, I simply felt that someone else was to blame. One had only to see Mrs. Hobbs to be certain

of it: she was one of those worried, untidy-looking women who seemed to set everything out of place, instead of making the simplest things beautiful. I always had the feeling that Mrs. Hobbs started badly and lost time somewhere and had never caught it up again; and I think Hobbs formed his opinion of woman-kind in general from this one example. At first I was inclined to censure Mrs. Hobbs very severely, but when I came to know the ins and outs of cottage life well, I learnt that those things which are essentials for the well-organised house are rare luxuries for the cottage home. Mrs. Hobbs had no ‘copper’ and no washhouse, she was forced to live in a perpetual washing day, boiling garment by garment in a small fish-kettle on the kitchen fire. She had a large family of children and no scraper at her door, an uneven and crumbling floor to keep clean. . . .

It is not sheer perversity which has made me single out Hobbs to call him ‘Squire,’ although I have seen him shoot a running pheasant! He has the qualities necessary to a really good squire, and perhaps some day there will be room for him. It is just because

he lacks those attractive characteristics which environment and education alone could have given him that people do not trouble to look deeper and find the real man. Hobbs' company was forced upon me, so I had no option.

Hobbs was the shepherd on the estate where I had come to be apprenticed and where afterwards I served temporarily as agent ; in addition to this he was placed in charge of one of the more outlying farms which was too distant to be directly under the agent's eye. Thus he was doubly responsible, and voluntarily he added more to his responsibilities ; of all the countrymen I have met he has the greatest capacity for work and needs the least sleep : he has half a day's work done—and done well—whilst others are abed. He took a pride in his work and accomplishments, and he did not mind letting you know it. Certainly the stock that passed through his hands prospered, his flock was free from foot-rot and he waged incessant war against the fly, his sows farrowed down well, and his store stock put on flesh. He had even reared foals on the bottle successfully. He was a good, self-taught thatcher. 'Dere baint mutt you tan't art me

and I tan’t do,’ he often used to say to me when I expressed surprise at finding him on some new job; ‘and I don’t tare wot de job i’ so long as I tan man’ge it.’ He knew his own value very well, and on one occasion he told me that he could get a job anywhere, at any time, and do almost anything. This is a healthy confidence for the ‘unskilled’ countryman to possess, and it gave my friend a feeling of independence which allowed him to express his views on things pertaining to the estate or the village. He took the trouble to be interested in these affairs; his position at this little outlying farm, and the trust put in his capacity, gave him a sense of responsibility and even ownership, and in the spirit of ‘Little Claus’ of Hans Andersen he would invariably talk of ‘my pigs’ and ‘my wheat.’ Mr. Gordon, the agent, was only too ready to co-operate with this initiative on the part of Hobbs; indeed, he had done much to encourage and develop it. I remember Hobbs telling me this himself one day quite indirectly. I was sitting on a stile with him after dusk, looking across to where Hobbs’ farm stood on an ancient bit of common land. There had once been four

tiny farms—independent homesteads—now the property of one owner. ‘How would you like “Swift’s” for your own small holding?’ I asked. ‘I don’t want no small holding, sir—why should I?—and besides, I ain’t got the money to risk and put into the place. It’s just as good as my own now, if I had a bit more pay. I does much as I likes and knows everything as goes on. It’s not as if Mr. Gordon didn’t tell me things or seem contented like, but he always tells I what my lambs fetches and if a thing turns out good or bad. If I wants to keep a pig I’ve only got to ask him, and he knows as I looks to his pocket to save for ’im anyway. No, sir, I’m content to work for a good master like Mr. Gordon. I’d like a bit of a talk with he sometimes: he’s a bit too reserved like, but we understands each other.’

The freedom which Hobbs had been given, and the knowledge he had gained about the estate and its affairs, had helped to form in his mind unconsciously a gospel which he was for ever explaining to me in his quaint fashion and carrying into practice in daily life. It appeared both in his relations with the estate and the village. ‘It’s a tind of dive and tate,

sir; you know I mean'—(It's a kind of give and take, sir; you know I mean)—'if I gets up at four and does my work and goes out of my way to do the boss a good turn, I feels as I've a right to a hour or two off when I wants it and have done my jobs. I gives my whole life to the boss and I don't see but what he can't help me at times, and he don't never refuse, neither. You see what I mean, sir—it's a kind of give and take.' He often worked from daylight to dusk without a murmur, and then if he wanted an afternoon off he would ask for it. I have even known him go to the Squire's and borrow a motor-car to fetch his 'kiddie back from t'ospital'—'for you know, sir,' he explained to me, 'I've often sat up till three of a morning to get 'un a good litter o' pigs.' 'I wants your bicycle to-night, please sir, if you baint using it. You're welcome to mine at any time when you wants it, as you knows'; or 'I'd just like a few o' them flowers, please sir, to take to t'ospital for my little girl.'

'Squire' Hobbs's relationship with his neighbours was expressed in somewhat similar terms. 'It's wot I talls bein' tind o' neighb'ly lite.'—

(It's what I calls being kind of neighbourly like.) I have often heard him say a good word for Smith or Brown: 'He's a good chap, sir, and 'll always help we, so I likes to oblige 'un.' I have only heard him speak roughly of women with tongues and men who did not pay their debts to the farm. I have known Hobbs negotiate the loan of horses at a busy time and repay the owner in mangolds because he was hard up for 'keep'—'and give 'un a good load, sir,' he would say. We used to do a good trade in selling fresh meat in the village, and often has 'Squire' Hobbs—an accomplished butcher among other things—refused to kill one week because Smith, some smaller neighbour, was killing a pig or sheep 'and we don't want to spoil his trade like.' In his off time he would kill and dress a pig for a good neighbour or show him how to do a bit of thatching. Hobbs had the qualities for inaugurating a co-operative movement. He had no doubt been given exceptional opportunities to develop; the agent had trusted him and given him freedom. Where this relationship is tried I have rarely seen it fail.

Hobbs, moreover, came of a fine family, and he was proud of it.

‘There ain’t one of the fam’ly but knows how to work. There baint many jobs you can’t put mother to and she can’t do, and better than a man, too, many on ’em. Mother and Nellie (his sister) can do a day’s work along o’ we. You just get mother and Nellie on to that job, sir, they ’ll soon do ’im. I think we be as good workers as you can get, sir, and mother and Nellie never took a drop in their lives, and she brought us all up straight, too, and a juster woman you never see’d.’ Hobbs spoke the truth about his family: they have done work for me and I know, and the family were as anxious to claim relationship with ‘Dick’ as many of the Squire’s week-end guests were to claim kin with titles. This family would be an asset to any estate; and yet the Squire is still convinced that every man is justly and automatically rewarded according as he is valuable to the community.

I have seen ‘Squire’ Hobbs with his back up against the wall when he held very strong views on a thing. ‘I baint goin’ to do that, sir,’ was his blunt reply to Mr. Gordon and myself on more than one occasion. He usually had some strong reason for his objection and

he did not mind airing it, and if he were wrong he was willing to admit it and do the job our way. Similarly he would sometimes say, 'I be goin' to do that job myself, sir,' when some work was suggested, and he was always sure to do it well. Some mistake his frank independence for insolence.

There was an unexpected strain of sympathy and gentleness behind Hobbs's rough exterior. 'You be worryin', sir, I knows. Don't you worry; things 'll go all right, and we 'll all do our best, and Mr. Gordon knows we can't do more.' This is how he addressed me almost the first night after I had come to fill Mr. Gordon's post temporarily. After that I used to stroll over to Hobbs's cottage nearly every night after dusk and talk over the affairs of the day. One night a fatting heifer was taken bad and I sat on a stile by the main road to await the 'vet.' 'Squire' Hobbs came and joined me and waited a whole hour 'for company like.' When 'his little girl' was in hospital he would jump on his bicycle after work and ride sixteen miles to take her a bunch of flowers or a painted postcard.

'Squire' Hobbs would never have been an 'intellectual' even if he had been reared

in kings’ libraries, and I doubt if he ever read anything but gardening journals in order to grow better the biggest shallots for the local show; but he philosophised about life in his own way. ‘I don’t think I receives a big wage—do you, sir? Thinkin’ I gives my whole life for fifteen bob a week, and I got to keep a family and pay my club out o’ that. I’d like to have a bit o’ money like some chaps, and yet I don’t believe I’d be much happier. I guess I’m as happy as any man on the place, sir, and gets as much out o’ life, but I ought to get a little more to myself like and a bit o’ comfort for the missus and the little ’uns.’ He was a man of the hedgerow, and with his gun and sheepdog he seemed completely happy. But intellectualism is not essential for squires, and Hobbs was a man of action, imbued with the social sense. He had another characteristic which fitted him for office—that of hospitality. ‘Come in, sir, and have a cup o’ tea: I always gives a cup o’ tea to anyone as is working down here’; and when his whiteheart cherries were ripe he always called me in for a feed. He would bring up a nice marrow or a basket of mushrooms to Mrs. Gordon at the farm, and

he always saw that every man on the estate had a rabbit or two.

Hobbs was not a brilliant talker, though he was always ready to 'pass the time o' day'; he had a sense of humour and was never at a loss with a reply. I never thought of meeting him without a few minutes' chat and an exchange of jokes. 'S'pose you'll be a shirker to-day, sir, as t' maid is here. When's it comin' off, sir? S'pose you'll soon make a business on it.' This was his comment when a cousin came on a visit, and when I introduced her to him he explained, with a nod at me, 'Just breakin' 'im in a bit, miss, and showin' 'im 'ow to do a bit o' work.' Whenever I came to the farm afterwards he asked after 't' maid,' and on one occasion when I replied, 'She's coming down here to-morrow,' he asked slyly, 'Same girl, sir?' and feigned great surprise when I said 'Yes!' But when I explained that Catholics don't usually marry cousins, there came the retort, 'Wot! You be one of them Roman Cath'lics as keeps Sunday on Saturday?'—and when I suggested to him that he was confusing us with the Jews, he was quite ready with a reply: 'Yes, so I be; of course you's one o' them that

lights a lot o’ candles and suchlike. I never thought you ’d be one o’ them. I don’t go to church much.’ Going on to talk of politics he exclaimed, ‘We ’re most on us Liberals here, but few on us votes, as the Squire ’s a Tory and he ’s always good to we; but neither on ’em ’s always right.’ ‘I think we gets on very well together, sir, you and me. I ’d sometimes like a bit o’ talk with the Squire about things, but he ’s never here but week-ends and when the house is full.’

The big country mansion and even the smaller manor house has been swiftly and silently changing hands. It has been a time of golden opportunities for the successful business man to establish himself and found a family, just as he struggled to do all through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Then the older gentry were jealous of the land. Now, far and wide the great captains of industry are buying ‘places’ and, with these ‘places,’ responsibilities which they do not fully realise and are hardly fitted for. I would as soon talk with these men as the Elizabethan sea kings: their lives are just as full of experience and adventure; but I would sooner meet them in an office throbbing with wires or in a model

garden city than taking their week-end pleasure off the land and giving back nothing of themselves. They have not gained the secret of the country, nor have they the spirit of the village in their hearts. The qualities of 'Squire' Hobbs, the sense of neighbourliness, of the dignity of agricultural work, simplicity, honesty—'Why—these, my dear chap—what are these things?' said one of the shrewdest and best of these 'new-made' country gentlemen to me. 'Why, we can insure a man's honesty for 2s. 6d. a year nowadays in London; these commodities have no value commercially. Now, if one of your labouring friends can invent a labour-saving machine. . . .' But these men are here, they are established in the country without knowing its simplest secrets. They are doing much for the land—they have brought their capital to it, they are the patrons of scientific agriculture, the owners of pedigree herds, the employers of labour. Yet the spasmodic week-end crowded with guests and society functions can never teach them the lessons which the countryman has learned by slow degrees. To them the village and its inmates are mere picturesque abstractions.

That is why ‘Squire’ Hobbs has won his spurs. He is the stuff from which a ‘squire’ could be made—a squire who could renew village life and country manners. ‘It’s just wot I calls bein’ kind o’ neighbourly like, you know, sir.’

CHAPTER VIII

MY MATE

I WAS conscious that Ben Harris, the working foreman, was taking stock of me as we crossed the cherry orchard. Such a consciousness is never pleasant, especially if one is anxious to create a good impression. I wondered if the creases in my trousers were too obvious, and whether my Norfolk jacket really bore witness to six years' hard wear. Only that morning I had heard Ben's criticism of another 'varsity man who had been shown over the farm. 'Bit of a toff, ain't 'e! I reckons 'e's not good for much.' I thought the best thing was to talk and make some intelligent remark about fruit prospects. The cherry trees were in full blossom and the branches festooned with white trusses of bloom. 'It looks like being a good cherry year if only the frost keeps off,' I began. My companion stopped and drew down a laden

bough for inspection. 'Just look!' he said. 'Did you ever see anything more lovely? See how they hang'; and he buried his face for at least a minute in the blossom before letting the bough go. 'Be gad, it's worth livin' a mornin' like this, I reckons! I could do with this 'ere all the time. We've got the best on it workin' outdoors. S'pose that's why you've taken up this job. Mos' chaps like you flies a bit higher, but I reckons as a chap who's got a bit o' money to put into it can 'ave as good a life as any if they goes the right way at it.' Ben Harris relapsed into silence again, but he had given me the lead and I no longer felt shy of talking. He seemed somehow to have realised my point of view, or, rather, to have the same point of view himself. From that time onwards I was working pretty regularly with Harris. Sometimes we would graft together for an hour without a word, and then would come the sound of the first cuckoo or the sight of the first swallow. My companion was all alert for these things, and it was only to listen to a song or to follow with his eye the track of a bird that he rested in his work. Then he would start to talk on birds and the furred families of the hedgerow,

for all of which he had a keen appreciation. The 'gardener' was too strong in him to make him the champion of the starling, but I could not get him to believe my tales of blackbirds 'gutting' my apples or of the chaffinches' partiality for gooseberry buds. It is a curious fact that the diet of our common English birds seems to vary very considerably in districts not so far apart. 'No, the chaps be too fond o' killin' things and throwing whenever they sees a bird; and someone's always a-robbing their nests and destroying them jus' for pleasure. I'm always at 'em about it. It's worth half a day's work to hear some o' them birds singing.' There were many things over which Ben Harris disagreed with the other chaps. Of course his position as working foreman of the gang was a delicate one, though Ben was as straight to both master and men as a man could be. But Ben had very strong views on things, and he was apt to express them. He had ideals of how work ought to be done, and even his strong democratic soul could not make him agree with a man who put his own holding before his master's farm. Ben had too much appreciation of things to be fully understood by the

gang as a whole : of course he had had opportunities to develop. Finally, Ben was the most ideal family man I have ever met, and this led him to say a good deal for teetotalism and against foul language. 'I know I'm a bit of a fanatic on one or two things,' he confided to me when we had got to know one another well; 'but I've seen a bit, and I knows the misery and degradation that goes where happiness ought to be. And there's some things that simply makes me feel quite bad and go all over queer—and drinkin's one.' A sensitiveness such as this, which gave Ben an intolerant horror of any form of alcohol, was quite incomprehensible to the gang; I have heard them, however, on more than one occasion debating as to what Ben would do or say under certain circumstances. I do not think that they had a remote conception of the deep feeling and emotion that there was in their leader, and yet the restraint they invariably showed in his presence—even in their conversation—proved that they were not uninfluenced by his asceticism. Ben did not enjoy his position as foreman; if ever there were any friction with the men he went about looking utterly miserable.

He was equally worried if anything proved a failure upon the farm. You have only to look at Ben Harris to discover his temperament: though the slightest of all the large gang of which he was the motive power and inspiration, he was a fine worker. He has keen blue eyes and very fair hair which would wave when he allowed it to grow long enough. His face was beautifully mellowed with that clear tanning which suggests at once the beating of rain and the scorching of sun. These elements have in fact entered into his nature. Despite the rough usage he has given his hands they undoubtedly belong to a man of refinement. To this day I love to watch the way in which he holds his tools, whether his pruning knife or his hoe: there is that nervous grip about the fingers which one may see on the artist's brush or poet's pen—a feeling, a groping, for some unseen, tenuous sensation.

From one aspect life is but a vast circuit of electric currents: men can connect themselves at any point on the circuit to the same life-stream and extract its essence and meaning. The artist connects himself up with it through the brush, chisel, or pen; the man of affairs

through rubbing shoulders with tragedy, comedy, and adventure; the priest by contact with the human soul: the same current passed up Ben's spade, into his very being, I am certain.

But I have not yet showed you the complete Ben. It was not until Good Friday that I saw it for myself, and then I discovered it quite spontaneously. All through the last days of Lent we were constantly grafting together, and we came to talk more as we discovered each other's interests. He would ask me of Spain and Italy and the dream city, my foster-mother; in turn he would tell me of his own native hills, of the silent and fragrant spots he loved to wander in. On Good Friday we were left working alone. It is one of the few optional 'half-days off,' when most of the gang play football for their village. But about this, too, Ben had strong views. 'I don't believe in makin' it a reg'lar holiday; if I baint goin' to church I can do as good work to-day as I can any day, I reckon. You comin' back after dinner? I'm not goin' back at this job alone; it's a dull job by oneself'—this was addressed to me. It was the first time I really realised that Ben wanted companionship. Of course

I went back, and we worked almost silently down our row of 'headed' trees. About four o'clock I heard the sound of children's voices and the scampering of little feet, and down a long alley of the plum trees I could see four children running towards us, followed by a woman carrying her baby. The children reached us first: there were two boys of ten and nine and two girls of four and six pulling at their father's coat and trousers all at once; the woman came up looking rather surprised. For a moment Ben stopped in his work to give her a kiss. 'Oh, I thought my boy would be all by himself this afternoon, so I came to look after him a bit, as I know he gets a bit lonesome. You've a nice afternoon for your work.' Such was her simple introduction. Mrs. Harris was a tidy, healthy woman with a kindly smile and a very pretty way of speech—an ideal country girl, I thought. She stayed and talked with us for a while, mostly about her family, of which she was justly very proud. 'Well, I must go and get the tea ready; you'll be back by six, won't you, dear? And won't you bring Mr. Holdenby in to have a cup of tea?' Then, turning to me—'I hope you'll come, Mr

Holdenby, if you don't mind the children.' So back I went to a simple tea of bread and butter and home-made jam. Then came the putting of the children to bed. . . . 'We'll stroll to the top of the bank with you: the wife and I always takes a stroll of a evening.' They two went arm in arm and I beside them. We must have strolled for an hour or more in the moonlight, for they took me to all the homely spots they loved—the pond, the old yew tree, and the knoll whence one sees a great way. They showed me all these places with a keen delight; they are places where I have lingered since, many an hour—the places of silences, spaces, and stars. 'You know I'd be frightened of the night if it weren't for Ben, Mr. Holdenby; but I love it when Ben's here. You see, I wasn't a country girl until Ben brought me here, but I wouldn't leave it for anything now; and it's such freedom for the children, though I find it lonesome when Ben's at work all day and the children at school. But now I have Babs, and he's trying to talk to me already.' When we parted I shook hands with them both and couldn't help saying, 'Thanks ever so much; I have enjoyed it.' 'So have we,

Mr. Holdenby,' answered Mrs. Harris. 'You must please to drop in whenever you likes. My boy has no friends now outside of his family, and he loves a bit o' company.' 'Yes,' added Ben; 'the last few years we've seen and talked to no one a bit edicated like, and if it hadn't been for the wife I'd have dropped right back to a kind of silent beast. It does a man good to talk to people as thinks and has a better edication than himself, I reckon. When I used to be nearer Felton (the market town) I saw a good bit o' the parson and school teachers like, and we used to have long talks, and they'd give one new ideas and bring one right out o' oneself; but here— I likes the parson: he's a good chap, I reckons, but he only comes down once in three or six months. I'd enjoy a good chat with 'e. Well, good night. We must have some more walks some night.'

At first I was rather diffident of intruding my company on these two married lovers, but they were so frank with me that our evening walks, and talks over the fire, became almost a daily rule. They became so indispensable that I eventually took up my abode with my new friends. They took me completely into their family, with a

deal of self-sacrifice and inconvenience to themselves, and they showed me such love and courtesy that I can truthfully say I always think of Ben's cottage as the ideal one. I would not dare to describe to you the devotion of that pair as I saw it all day and every day, for I was a privileged person and I shall ever value my privilege. Ben's life is not an easy one, nor is his wife's; but, all the same, they are to be envied. Once again, the gang dimly realised something of the devotion that the Harrises had for one another, for more than once a big coarse man told me in low tones that 'Ben be real in love with his missus'; but when they were together the gang rather jeered at it. 'Ere comes ol' Ben's missus as usual a-lookin' after 'e!'—for Mrs. Harris and her family came to meet Ben every night from work. 'I can't just understand some of these chaps,' Ben used to say to me. 'They talks of their womenfolk just as they would of a glass o' beer, or rather they reckons them a bit lower, for if they has a day off they can't get along without the beer, but they never thinks o' takin' their wives with 'em. Now, I think a woman's the most beautiful thing a man's got; I'd

simply be an animal if it weren't for the wife, and I'm never happy away from her; whereas these chaps looks on their women just as animals, by the way they talks.' Only a few weeks ago Ben travelled across England to pay me a visit, and then he would only stop one night. He looked a bit worried all the time, and as I said good-night to him it came out: 'I hope the wife and kiddies be all right: it's only the second night in all our twelve years' married life as I've slept away from the wife.'

In the evenings as we worked together we used to talk of many things long and seriously, and I found that Ben thought very deeply and seemed glad to relieve himself by talking. There are several evenings that stand out very vividly in my memory among the early days when I used to stay behind to give him a hand in his flower garden: the night when he told me in his simple way, 'I do so like to have a mate'; that moonlight stroll with his wife on one arm, when he slipped his other arm in mine; and, perhaps the proudest moment of all, when his little girl, on seeing me, shouted, 'Here comes the man as works with Dad'—then I was indeed recognised by the family as 'Dad's mate.'

Perhaps I remember best of all the day when I was worried and had unburdened my trouble to him. I happened to be finishing a job by myself away from the gang on another part of the farm; my thoughts were far away, when I was conscious of Ben's hand on my arm. 'Come an' work along of us; you won't be lonesome,' he said in his simple way. He was always doing these kind things. Now I mention these facts not only because they are especially dear to me, but because Ben had very strong views about class, and I want to show more or less how these views were based. I have already quoted Ben's criticism of the 'young toff.' In the heat of the long summer we were often working by the side of a white main road when huge and luxurious motor-cars were rushing by all day and unwittingly adding to the discomforts of the tired workers. One day I remember Ben drawing himself straight up and, looking across at me, he made this remark and resumed his work again: 'It's a bit hard to see all them folk a-takin' their pleasure like that and we just a-working like this.' But it was during one of our evening talks that I was most struck; we were pricking

out seedlings together into boxes in the dusk ; we had got into the subject of class. 'It's the most depressing thing of all in the situation, I feel,' I was saying ; 'this class hatred, it's going to ruin everything.' He leant across the box we were working at, and in the same quiet voice in which he had said so many gentle things, he replied, 'D' you know, I can fully understand it and sympathise with it.' So could I, but I had hoped against hope that my country friends perhaps had not realised things. If only they knew history—the history of the eighteenth century is enough ! But Ben Harris, who liked to talk with educated people, who saw nature with their eyes, who despised violence, even he had come to see the things that had so long been left undone, even though he did not know the eighteenth century.

In discussing the rural problem he put it this way : 'Of course it's been a fine chance for landlords to do a power of good without hurting themselves, and some of 'em have, and then they brings social life and edication and all to the village ; but most on 'em seems to have forget their responsibility now, and they've missed their chance ; and we can't wait for ever. As it

is, I can't see nothing for it but for the State to help a man and have the land as security. Some of these chaps ain't done very much to get their money, and when they gets it they seem to lose all proportion of things.' Of course he did not understand Oxford life and 'all those young chaps with a chance of learnin' a-goin' on like so many schoolboys. Well, if one of us was to get drunk and smash a window it wouldn't be no joke: there's no doubt as to us getting locked up. One can't deny there's a law for the rich and another for the poor. Some of these chaps just looks as if one oughtn't to live!' Harris had a keen sense of responsibility, and he felt that money or wealth was perhaps the biggest responsibility of all: he was just as critical of his own class wasting it on drink; besides, though he was a man of refinement and keen perception, like all manual labourers he was apt to judge of a man's capacity for work by his capacity to endure physically. This standard of excellence is a very natural one for men whose characters have been built up through such endurance, and it is not altogether a foolish standard, but it does not allow for that wide world of

mental struggle and fortitude which scarcely came within Ben's ken, whose worst mental worries are the exigencies of poverty. There was always an eagerness on Ben's part to see if a man could do 'a good day's bean-planting or hoeing,' and he judged a little harshly of those who failed. I think that is why, to a very large extent, one can only really get to know the countryman by working with him, week in, week out. Then the reserve and suspicion gradually die, and class is forgotten. The countryman is willing to forgive class if one can meet him across the plank of 'work.' Ben was not a politician; he was convinced there was 'too much party in it,' but at the same time he felt that a great change was working in English life. 'It's all right if a man does something with what he's got, but I'm sure there's going to be a big change,' he would often say. He realised to a certain extent, and appreciated a good deal more, all that environment and tradition had given to the gentry, but I think he felt the gentry had been selfish over it. Of course he was right, and this is ever so much more noticeable in the country, where every unit counts for civilisation.

The parson, the schoolmaster, and the squire represented to him the education and civilising influences near his reach yet tantalisingly debarred him. If only Oxford and rural England could meet more often and more intimately under the blossom boughs there would be more understanding, and more cohesion in village life.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. 'ANNS AND THE OTHERS

MY mate knew what home meant, as very few of his companions did. Every word and act centred round the 'wife and kiddies.' After a hard day's work he returned to a house well-swept and garnished, which spoke to him of the love and care exercised throughout the day in expectation of his home-coming. After his tea he would 'dig the spuds' or chop the wood, with Mrs. Harris by his side, or he would help her to fetch in the washing and 'bath the kiddies.' There was a real companionship between them which meant everything in their life of struggle. Harris was mystified at the relationship which he saw existing between men and women around him, both in his own and other spheres of life.

One night the topic of conversation turned upon 'Society.' 'No, I reckons that the whole thing be wrong from top to bottom—the whole

principle of the thing. You'll mos' likely laugh at me, but I can't see as why a man should always be expected to look after another chap's wife. It ought to be good enough for a chap to take his own wife in to dinner and dance with her. I knows I wouldn't like it if I saw another feller with his arm aroun' my wife; besides, they'd enjoy 'emselves a lot better, too, if they did everything together. Yet it's the wrong thing, or s'posed to be.' As for his fellow-labourers, he could 'never understand the way them chaps talks o' their womenfolk.' I do not think my mate realised fully that his home was essentially different from that of the other labourers, in that 'the wife' was always there to make it home; for Harris earned a wage enough to save his wife from going out to work. Moreover, Mrs. Harris was a girl from the town, with all the knack of the town in her housewifery, which she had adapted to country requirements. On the question of letting his wife go out to work with the other women Harris was obdurate, even though she often pleaded to be allowed to earn her own 'pin money.' 'Jus' to think of letting the wife go out along of Mrs. 'Anns and the others!'

said my mate indignantly. 'Why, I can't go near 'em myself without stopping my ears. Their talk's far worse than any men's.'

All through the radish and onion season, through the soft and hard fruit seasons, during haymaking and harvest, I had a great deal to do with 'Mrs. 'Anns and the others'; for days together I have been in the sheds with them, 'checking their counts,' or in the open, weighing up their berries. Certainly they never ceased talking, yet, after long weeks of listening, I cannot recall a single phrase or opinion that I should be proud of repeating either for its curiosity, wit, or simplicity. Their conversation was almost invariably in the form of raillery, and they very often forgot they had begun in jest, and ended in real earnest. The raillery nearly always took a personal form, often cruelly unkind or coarse. The married woman with no family was the special object of mirth; the plain face was treated unmercifully. The women were very intimate in their uncomplimentary nicknames for each other, yet whenever one happened to be absent the other nine had a common bond and subject for conversation in abusing her. They rejoiced if

one of their number were found out in a 'short count' or 'short weight.' I knew one woman accuse her own daughter of the fault to escape ridicule herself. If the conversation reached a higher level there were two possible alternatives—the one, to pass in review all the workmen on the farm, from their moral code to the fit of their trousers; the other, to vie in making innuendoes about all the villagers in turn who were not present to defend themselves.

All this is most unpleasant writing, for there are among the women toilers of the field some for whom I have a great admiration. I was anxious to like Mrs. 'Anns and the others because they were of the fields, because they had learned to endure with their husbands, because they were vastly picturesque in their pink and lilac sun-bonnets and red and black check aprons. Mrs. 'Anns is rather a typical figure. I afterwards discovered her name was Mrs. Sands—hence the corruption. She possessed also a nickname among the others: it was either 'Mrs. Pepper' or 'Pecker'; as both seemed equally appropriate I made no further investigation. Mrs. 'Anns was very broad and muscular and weather-beaten, with steel-grey eyes and

hair, and a very harsh voice. Her chief companion was tall, thin, and sallow, with large 'goggle spectacles' and a querulous expression. No one ever got the better of Mrs. 'Anns—though they often tried. By the men she was known as 'the Duchess' for her bitter tongue, and they baited her ungallantly on her muscularity. She led the women, and in the case of a strike at picking time, she did all the talking; and it did not take much to set her grumbling.

Such only too often are the wives of the country labourers—wives on whom depends so largely the civilising of the men, the men who are earning 14s. to 16s. a week or less. As a rule the men are working from six to six, the women from eight to five. The wives probably just get home in time to 'knock up a meal' before their husbands return; on Saturday or Monday they stay at home to do the washing. If they happen to have a daughter of fourteen years or upwards, she may do those things instead, and so the mother may spend even less time at home. I have known women to work all day on one farm and then go out again in the summer evenings to work on another. If they have young families they are

often obliged to take them on to the ground until they are old enough to toddle to school. As soon as the girls leave school, and even in their holidays, they are brought to join Mrs. 'Anns and the others to earn a bit at 'tying,' 'bunching,' or 'picking.' So they begin life very young.

I remember watching one shy little girl of fifteen go from short skirts into long, and I recall the first day she joined the women. 'Wot! Nellie with 'er 'air up a'ready! The men 'll soon be looking after thee then.' Such was her first greeting. I watched her closely, and her discomfort, during those first few days of chiding at the benches; perhaps the other women had noticed, and thought that I was 'interested,' for I remember one day, when they thought I was occupied, one woman leaning over to Nellie and whispering audibly some remark about 'Curlywig' (which I knew was their nickname for myself), a remark which vastly amused all the other women but made Nellie turn scarlet. If the girls are not brought into this atmosphere or sent into domestic service, the cooking and washing is handed over to them at the earliest moment, to free their mothers

for the field. They have to learn by intuition all that pertains to womanhood. They have no real domestic training either; the school education has done little for the girls who choose to remain in the country. They have only one way of escape—to become themselves wives and mothers—and they are sometimes in too great a hurry. One can hardly blame them. In the nearest market town on Saturday night congregate groups of village lads ogling and gaping at their gayer sisters of the town—sisters who know more and fly higher than the country girl. The country girl has often to be complaisant if she is to keep faithful the lad who ‘walks her out’; she realises the possibilities of motherhood only by actual experience.

I am not excusing the country lass to accuse the country lad, for he too is drafted on to the soil as soon as he has ‘passed his standards’ and can carry a spade, if he cannot ‘get a job in the town.’ And he commences young a life with little variety and excitement in it, a life which he has only too often adopted from lack of other opportunity. Once a year comes the village ‘mop’ or ‘fair’—a gaudy clanging

thing of brilliant flares and exciting music, wild horseplay and suggestive 'side-shows.' I have witnessed many a mop myself: it caters for the animal tastes, it has not an elevating atmosphere. For the rest of the year the young men can adjourn to the High Street of the nearest town to jostle and wink at the passers-by. There is now the option of the picture house which might prove a great factor in their lives. There may be a village football club, or reading-room where the lads meet to drink beer, throw darts, read the comic papers or tell stories. Being largely left to themselves they cannot be expected to have much initiative. So the lad starts walking out as soon as he can find a girl, long years before there is any hope of getting married, and seeks his relaxation with her in the hedgerow.

I cannot deal fairly with this question of sex without referring briefly to the scandalous lack of accommodation in a large number of our country cottages—a single one of which I have seen shared by two or three families. There are large families of growing boys and girls herded together into cottages where decent family life is utterly out of the question.

Nothing but good is done, I believe, by a healthy intimate relation between the sexes, but I cannot describe country conditions as such. Accommodation is often utterly inadequate, privacy wholly impossible. There are very many large families in a cottage where one bedroom has been 'partitioned' to make two, where the inner one is only approached through the outer. I remember on a big estate a labourer describing a cottage to me. 'Ay, it be a place with one room, and there be eight or nine growed-up men and women a-living together.' On investigation I found it was a grown-up family of brothers and sisters, literally living in a cottage with a single bedroom. It seems paradoxical that these hovels should be at the very doors of people who parade our national morals even to driving workmen from their cottages and farmers from their homesteads, because, as one man expressed it to me, 'his daughter be a naughty girl.'

I do not think the countrywoman is given a fair chance of even realising the dignity of her sex. Then how can she take upon herself to refine the home?—and she is the labourer's hope of refinement. Both men and women take their cue from the beasts of the field with

whom they are intimate : they speak of each other and act accordingly. I do not think they have a conception of any higher relationship. These women who are almost annually mothers have to face other physical strain and suffering too in the fields. Their food and surroundings are inadequate to support their motherhood even ; there can be little room for mental development besides. It is not to be expected that they can rise above all that drags them down ; sometimes they do, but I think one can understand Mrs. 'Anns' own view of her vocation in life, when, on seeing an old sow with her litter of thirteen pass the door, she called out triumphantly to her neighbour, 'Well, she only beat I by one !' When a town girl comes to be the wife of a countryman I have often noticed a great difference. She has a better knowledge of her power, a better grounding in refinement.

The men, too, fall into line, and rate their womenfolk as they rate themselves. I have often heard the older married men vying with the younger lads, who were still 'walking out,' in the coarsest talk ; the younger lads even seemed to enjoy the insinuations of the older

men about themselves and their 'girls.' Even in their ordinary attitude to family life they show an utter lack of being conscious of any companionship. The family is the woman's affair. When I inquired of one labourer about his family, which was a large one, he told me of Bill, Ned, Liza, and Jess. Then he got held up. 'But those aren't all, are they?' I asked with a smile. 'Lor', I can't tell 'e,' he replied, scratching his head; 'I never can tell 'ow many there be or where they be—but Nance 'll know.' Of course I have often been told, 'You see, we 've 'ad no luck of late—the missus 'ave 'ad a kid these past four year.' I remember a group of labourers discussing together the respective merits of their wives. 'Lor'! an' Jack 'ave got the ugliest o' the 'ole lot,' remarked one. 'Ay, maybe,' replied Jack: 'but my ol' dad always used to say to I, "Now, Jack, if you 've a mind to keep your woman to yersel,' you choose the ugliest yer can find," and I knowed 'e was right and took 'is advice.' The people talk and jest unmercifully together of the village scandals—which I often think they largely invent because their minds move only in one circle. The whole tendency

of their lives is to make that circle an animal one. They need some very strong influence to counteract this: of course there is none. I remember asking unwittingly one day which of two sisters was the shepherd's wife—they were so much alike. I might have expected the ready reply: 'No wonder you asks. I don't think t' ol' shepherd himself could tell 'e.' The sole ground for this remark, as far as I know, was the fact that the married sister made a home for her unmarried twin.

I knew one simple, sensitive lad who was captured by what the village calls 'a naughty girl.' I know he had only met the girl for the first time a few months before they were married. Some short time after, the boy learnt his mistake when he was presented with a son. The village was so unmerciful over the 'good bargain' he had made, that the lad left home and went off to the colonies.

It is no surprise then that the country lanes have their 'Nell' who is always going a-black-berrying and finds only thorns in the hedges. It is no wonder that in every village street one sees the nameless yet lusty love-child: lusty because the mother has not yet

completely gone under the yoke. Surely it is a curious paradox which produces our finest children out of lawful wedlock, yet I have often stopped in a village street to ask about some fine-built boy or girl playing there. 'Ay, that be Aubr'y: 'e's a fine boy, but 'e ain't got no father.' I have seen the village beauties, too, led off to the towns by flattery and promises of success, only to return to hide their shame where Mother Earth alone has pity and understanding. There is a brighter side to all this too, as a rough man put it in his own way in telling how he had been forced to marry his wife. She was a charming, refined, country girl, and presented her lover with a beautiful son. I know them both. 'Well, when I first 'eard,' said the man, 'I said as it was jus' my usual bad luck. But now I knows as it's the best thing as ever 'appened to me.'

The women, too, have maintained their reputation for their tongues. To this day it is held as a firm belief in many parts of the country that ' 'Twas the women as put an end to our Union. They used to go at we and ask us why we wanted to keep ol' Joey Arch a gennelman. S'pose they wanted the money. So we stopped

a-paying to get a bit o' peace.' I wonder if the men ever realise that marriage is a two-sided affair and how little they are giving back to contribute to the woman's happiness.

I should like to help my village sisters. They have a hard fight to wage with their womanhood, and they do not even know the power of it. If only more of our country ladies could bear to face the coarseness and dullness of it and would show them by degrees the great bond of sisterhood, I believe it would not only bring the women consolation in their bondage, it would also make the men see their own wives in a new light. The glamour of social work in the town is so much greater; perhaps the sins are bigger, but the country is crying out for the men and women who will give themselves and really mingle with the land. Plenty of generous folk give money, but only flesh and blood can do the work.

I have never forgotten the cry of a country-woman whom I came to know very well. We were talking one day together about her children, and thence we got on to happiness as a quality. 'I have an absurd capacity for happiness,' I was saying, when her big blue eyes suddenly

filled with tears. 'D'you know, sir, as they always used to say in the village as how I was the happiest girl about, afore I got married. I knows I used to be in the fields all day a-picking flowers and a-listening to the birds singing and watching the lambs jumping. They all used to call me "Merry Kate." But Bill—well, 'e's my 'usband and the bes' man as I knows—but 'e jus' didn't understand, and so 'e laughed me out on it all. An' then came the time as 'e got into trouble and thought as I didn't know. Of course I knowed, which only made it worse, for w'en 'e came back that there drunk with despair I 'ad to preten' to be angry, and all the time I was sorry. Well, all the natural life was kind o' gone out o' me, and if I hadn't had God and His pries' to talk to, I think I 'd 'a died.' And how many country-women know how to talk to God in their troubles? They have not even a human being to whom they can open their hearts.

CHAPTER X

A GOOD GLASS O' NUT-BROWN

How incomplete the day seems if we have watched the dawn, worked through its stress, and are then robbed of the still sunset by a quick-descending storm. There is lacking a completeness of harmony. We feel we have lived a day ill, on those occasions when our being has failed to travel, as by a clear road, the circuit from east to west.

Bill Brown, up before sunrise, has toiled from six to six and felt the scorching rays beat down on his neck. Tired out, at sunset he trudges home to tea, but instead of peace and rest he finds a chiding tongue. Brown's wife, irritable after her hard day, gets only grumbling and sullenness because the children cry or there are only potatoes and gravy for supper. If Brown chances not to find companionship in the woman he has made his wife, he will not

find it at home. The kitchen will not accommodate his mates, and many are the times when the firing has to be saved. Bill's alternative is to go out and leave 'the missus.' He seeks company elsewhere, but not in the parish room where 'the lads be a-fooling,' nor in the reading-room where the squire or parson may try to 'get 'old on 'e or talk their temperance stuff.' Bill goes to 'The Three Wheatsheaves,' where the other lively spirits of the village are gathered for a talk and a drink.

'I could just do with a good glass o' nut-brown.' 'I reckons as a glass o' beer does a man good if he sticks to a pint or two.' I learnt to agree with my friends, though I could never enjoy 'a pint of draught bitter' until I had worked side by side and exchanged mugs with them. Then I came to see that, for some of us at least, 'no amount o' water will quench a chap's thirst or put the 'eart in 'im like a glass o' nut-brown.'

Coffee is good, and so no doubt is cocoa ;

Tea did for Johnson, and the Chinamen,

but my friends are in need of good cheer even more than Calverley, and something to whet their wits after a hard day's work. 'A glass o'

nut-brown,' besides satisfying a very insistent physical craving by its bitter draught, has a kind of ruminative influence that makes one view a hard day through a mellow light. There is something even in the way we drink our beer, out of those thick china mugs with blue and pink bands, which is helpful to us. We do not 'go at it' often, and in small mouthfuls as if we had been revelling all day in the sunlight and merely wished to keep the fragrant bloom on our tongue. It is no Chianti we are drinking. No; we take long draughts and few, and, betwixt them, long pauses. But this chill current of bitter ale, like some 'smooth sliding Mincio,' seems to impart a breadth of view as if it had travelled over the warm Lombard Plain. By contrast it puts sun into us and drowns any bitterness of the working day. Now comes the reaction, for we want our merriment to be spontaneous and from the heart. But we do not all stop there, nor do we realise that we may be buying our laughter at the cost of stinting our homes. I have seen men drink four or five pints at a sitting. They may easily spend 8*d.* or 1*s.* a night out of a weekly wage of 16*s.*

By about eight o'clock the bar of 'The Three Wheatsheaves' is pretty full. It is already stuffy, a hot fire burns, but we can stand a deal of warmth after a day's work, as we sit in our clammy clothes. Most of the male villagers are here. There is a bit of general gossip on village matters, a word or two about the day's news as someone had heard it from the passing carrier. Perhaps one man has a paper and reads out portions, devoid of any context, for criticism and remark. Then in about half an hour 'the chaps as come in reg'lar' for the nightly pint or jug begin to go home. The chink of coppers, the clink of mugs, a few shouted 'good nights,' a blast of cold air through the door, and the bar parlour is half emptied. Would it were quite empty. But Bill Brown and seven or eight others sit on until 'the house shuts,' and they form a circle round the table and fire. At first the talk is amusing; we have done with village gossip for a bit and we naturally turn to politics. 'Well, I 'ears as the new folk as be comin' to the Mill 'Ouse be Lib'erals, so maybe the village 'll begin to hum a bit,' speculates Bill. 'Lor', Bill, you seem to 'ave a lot of faith in the letter

L, you do,' comes a voice from the chimney corner. This is Ned Willis, a great powerful man of six foot, with a purple birth-mark covering one cheek. In daytime he has an eye so straight that we always single him out for the seed barrow or marker, yet many a night he never finds his way home. 'Ay, ay, that I 'as,' answers Bill; 'I can swallow the letter L a lot better than I can the letter T—drat 'em.' Then follows some heated discussion, some stamping on the floor, and a good many alliterative epithets. 'Well, I knows as I'll share a mug with any man as is a good "Rad" in this room,' is Bill's clinching argument. It is an 'argumentum ad hominem' but temporarily effective. There follows a general assent of 'Ay, ay,' and two of the party clink their mugs together with, 'Another pint all round, missus'; then there is a counting out of coppers, a general relighting of pipes, and for a moment all is quiet, save for the drinking. Ned's voice begins again: 'An' wot about that there Insurince Ac'?' There is a general murmur, mugs go up and down, and a new voice interjects: 'I say it be more plague ner profit, and them as invented it be no friend o' the workin'

man.' 'Then I says you be a fool,' started Bill, when a fourth man joined in the argument : ' You jus' look at ol' Bailey now : the las' nine winters 'e's been a-laid up for fourteen week or more and nigh on starvin'. No club would pass 'e. Now 'e be drawin' 5s. a week ! ' ' Wot be five shillings ? ' retorts another man. ' Five shillings 's five shillings,' was the reply ; ' an' if I'm not wrong your missus won't be very long afore she gives you another nipper. You won't think thirty bob amiss then, and yer needn't go an' whine to the parson this time.' This brought a general roar of laughter against the former speaker, who was effectually silenced for the evening. ' Wot I says is as I don't see why us should pay the same as them town chaps as 'as better wages and more sickness. We ain't often ill, an' if we bes, we usually ain't long about dying. I says it ain't fair,' so Ned returned to the charge. ' You wait a bit until your turn comes, and then see if you ain't as grateful as ol' Anthony,' said Bill with a threatening nod. Ned was ready with his reply : ' It 's all a-payin' out it is, and it comes hard on chaps with our wage ; the boss ought to be made pay it all. I don't like to see the

coppers goin'.' Nevertheless they did go, for there was 'another pint all round' and a general clinking of mugs. Some of the party refused to talk politics, 'for there's no knowin' who'll repeat things,' and two or three remained completely silent the whole evening, just drinking steadily and drawing at their pipes. They usually swelled the laughter.

Then the conversation would turn. Perhaps I might glean a handful of village philosophy or wit. Bill Brown held forth on his maxim of 'not 'urrying over a job.' 'There be no use in killin' oneself over it,' he would conclude. 'Well, if you did, you'd 'ave fewer 'taters to dig an' peel, any'ow,' was the first remark of a whitehaired old man. 'Ay, ay; one might be worse off, as Jack says,' responded Ned. This attitude to life seemed partly to explain to me the cause for the whole gathering; it certainly explained to me Ned's oft-repeated statement, 'I feels as if I'd like to get real drunk to-night.' Anything for a relief, to be able to forget the monotony of ill-remunerated toil: something to bring a new element into their circumscribed lives. Perhaps some one would start on the promise of the plum blossom

in the cottage gardens. 'I'm thinkin' you may be makin' a pound or two on yer plums this year, Jack,' said one, addressing the old man. Jack growled, and then came out with another dictum. 'I never believes in sellin' wot I wants mysel'; if I've beans and bacon to see us through the winter, I'm thinkin' as we'll enjoy our own plums. It baint satisfying enough to look at the blossom.' Old Jack never drank too much; he was a stern family man who sacrificed his pleasure for the youngsters. He came to the inn to air his philosophy rather than to drink. For months together he never took a glass, because, as he told us, 'I be savin' to buy a bit of a bicycle.' We all expected him to turn up to work on this second-hand trophy; but no: 'I've been thinkin' my legs 'av carried me well eno' these fifty years, but the youngsters, they be needin' all them new fangled things.'

By this time Bill and Ned were drinking pretty heavily and laughing rather loudly over it. They know no restraint of manner, and the air is full of their snortings and beer fume. The solitary but reeking oil lamp on the bar behind us gets dimmer. They begin to tell

stories. They start with the day's horseplay and their prowess at 'throwing' mud or stones at different members of the gang. In their pranks there is often something more than mere childishness. If they have a grudge against any fellow labourer, they become cruel. They are like animals in this. I remember one man whose life was made a perfect misery, not only with throwing, but he would find his dinner hidden or covered in grit, and often he would have to work through the day on an empty stomach. They do not confine their tricks to the men. I have known the women driven from the sheds at dinner-time because the men would torment them. Things were so bad that the 'boss' had to remonstrate. It was Bill Brown who half filled the radish baskets, from which the women had to tie, with nettles. 'I baint forgettin' the ladies,' he explained to me with a wink. So to-night as he got merrier he did not forget the ladies, or 'the besses o' the barn' as he called them. Bill Brown was never satisfied with a single repetition of his story; he would repeat the pungent parts over and over at intervals, laughing louder each time. He waxed keen on the village

wenches and the trials of the married man; any who had resisted his blandishments were 'tough old pullets!' Then he came to tell of his experiences of local village pubs. These seemed to carry me right back to the orgies of the eighteenth century and the days of Fielding. Could I be dreaming? No. The waning fire slipped down in the grate, and the momentary flicker lit up the flushed faces alive with animal delight. A clatter from the back of the room announced that the landlord was drawing out the shutter. 'Sorry to disturb you, gennelmen, it be gone ten.' It was with a horrid sensation that I watched Ned, that great six-foot giant, set out for home. Sometimes one feels how skin-deep civilisation really is.

'It isn't as if there was many chaps as get real drunk every night, but they has a good bit more than they can afford on their wage, and there's no doubt that it be one of the problems of the village,' said a yeoman to me one night when we were discussing things. He had inherited his land from his great-great-grandfather at least. 'And what's more, it's we who are largely to blame for it. We farmers

have got ourselves to thank.' I looked rather surprised, so he went on: 'You see, instead of giving the chaps a decent wage we swilled them out wi' drink. It's all the beer and cider of generations as 'av made these chaps like fishes. They've got used to living poor like, they don't look for comforts; but it's the drink—they still must have the beer as we trained them to. And we've got to raise the whole standard of living if we're to deal with it proper. There may be lots o' ways of tackling intemperance, but I believes in doing it by going and having a glass with 'em myself. Make the pub a decent place like, and no crime to have a glass o' beer, and then we'll have less swilling. At present most decent chaps won't stay in the pub much after eight, and there's nowhere as chaps can mix free and have decent talk.' Many a man has made the same complaint to me. 'There be nowhere a chap can go an' 'av a talk an' a glass o' beer without people a-talkin'.' I have seen men, too, sulking because they were receiving beer money and tea instead of beer at harvest time. 'There be many as would rather work any day for a drink than a good honest wage, an' I believe that's wot 'elps to keep

wages low in these parts,' remarked a labourer to me.

Bill, Ned, Jack, and their mates are good workers, but they are something besides. They are no more nor less than big overgrown children whose manly passions and propensities have outgrown their knowledge of control and mental development. Nature provides for the growth of the former. No one has efficiently provided for the development of the latter. They are turned out into the fields before their minds have really opened. They live almost in isolation. Their simplicity is amazing. You could perform the confidence trick on many of them several times in a single week before they would realise anything. Indeed the casual labourer from the towns is sometimes not above attempting it successfully. But here is old Jack, who was so full of wise saws in the village inn last night, sending hard-earned half-crowns in answer to bogus advertisements which promise to tell him by return how to earn five pounds a week or send him ten pounds' worth of household goods for nothing. He has not done it only once or twice, but many times, and he still relates his misad-

venture with surprise and grief. Watch Ned and Bill at the fair, listening to the old cry, 'Old lamps for new.' They know nothing of Aladdin and the wonderful lamp! They expect a bargain. See their childish rage when they discover the fraud: they run back shouting, 'The duck pond!'—but lo! the man with the big carpet bag has vanished!

With the same simplicity they rush out to cheer the canny gipsy as his gaudy and mysterious caravans enter the village after harvest time. They will leave the village truly like the caravans of the East, laden with spoil heavier than cocoanuts and goldfish. With light hearts and childish laughter a man and his missus will ride away the hard-earned harvest extras and overtime on prancing wooden horses to the sound of a drum and cymbals; and they wonder who has pilfered the poultry run into the bargain while they were enjoying themselves. Mr. Gipsy does himself well in the village, but he will get just the same welcome next year. The villagers congratulate themselves on their acuteness in collecting 'samples,' and then they fall easy prey to the insistent traveller with his painted tin boxes of tea,

sweetmeats and biscuits, as he follows in the wake of his baits. The older folk are simpler still. They prefer to trudge to the big market town for their pensions as the post office there 'be a lot better off' than the village one; and they like to arrive as the office opens in case 'the money runs out.' Their bodies are unwieldy and out of proportion to their minds, which have been circumscribed by the ever-narrowing village life of the last few centuries. All children are receptive of ideas, and so are my friends. They only need to be interested in the right way. A little more village life for them, meetings, entertainments, in which they would be interested, in which they might take part and not be shamed and relegated to the back seats. Medieval life offered them much more opportunity. We have never replaced the miracle or morality, or even the bear-baiting! I have seen consummate bits of mimicry and buffoonery among my friends, latent genius in sound and gesture, things which could rival Bottom and his company. But art has become the prerogative of the elect.

We cannot do without these great, overgrown, lovable children, who sing coarse ditties at

their work and lark when the sun is on them or the 'nut-brown' in their veins. But if their starved minds could speak as their hungry bodies do, they would say in metaphor what Bill said when he felt famished: 'I reckons as my belly 'll be thinkin' my jaw be cracked an' out o' work.'

CHAPTER XI

THE TRAVELLERS

THE 'open road' has its call for many of us. At the outset, 'free and lighthearted' we face its hard and dust-dried surface, expectant of the green, sunlit spaces whither it may lead. It speeds us 'along with a strange uplifting of the heart.' We are all eyes for those strangers who will meet and hail us by the way. There is a consciousness of adventure, the problem as to whether we shall return, or, perchance remain, in some elysian field.

There is no such suggestion of possibilities for the casual labourer from our city slums as he annually tramps the main road leading out into the country. He has long been 'down on his luck,' and he knows that the green fields will give him no more of a resting-place than the grey slums. The passing stranger, whom he hails, hurries by with a grunt, fully

on his guard against 'fellows who beg.' In the country we call these casuals 'Foreigners,' or 'Travellers,' and they know it; and from their look and manner they display to the full their consciousness of outlawry. We note their coming and their going as we do the swallows', but with our feelings reversed. In some counties they come before the cuckoo and stay right on until the cold and damp, and realisation that they have earned and spent their last penny in the neighbourhood for the year, forces them to 'move on.' They do not come in with song like the birds, but they usually depart with it, singing or wailing their retreat back to the town through every village street. When they come for long seasons it is usually in whole families; they take all odd jobs they can find from hay time to harvest, and through fruit and vegetable picking. They will go bird-scaring or docking, bean-picking or mangold-cleaning. Where there is fruit they pick most of it; where there are hops they usually come for a shorter period altogether, and with fewer men. Some districts do not know them at all.

There is a curious tragedy surrounding

these begrimed people, though they have much to blame themselves for. If you know aught of country labour watch them at work, and you may have a history revealed to you. In my full physical strength it took me many weeks before I could handle the hoe or prong, hayrake or picking-basket with that ease, accustomedness, and even grace, that I recognise in the countryman. Many of these travellers, out of condition with their street corner existence, never attain this ease, though they return to the same occupations year by year. But I have watched many a man from the town falling into the rhythmic swing. His face takes the sun, too, as if he were no real townsman. 'Ay, he shapes well, do ol' Duncan, and 'e knows 'ow to 'andle 'is tools, wot's more; if it weren't for Saturday nights and the beas'ly drink, 'e'd make a real good worker. But that there drink lays 'im out fair, and it be Monday or Toosday afore 'e be at work again. W'en 'e's right, 'e can keep up a-hooving along o' we all day,' remarked one of the farm hands to me about one of the casuals. Here and there you may see a traveller 'going right away' from the rest of his kind when they are

working together. 'Yes, I be'd born in these parts,' you will often hear if you inquire; 'but my dad 'e went off to the town long afore us nippers could do a bit of work: 'e thought as 'ow 'e'd make a bit more fer to keep a big fam'ly. Well, we never settled to nothink—'twas a case of odd jobs like. I al'ers 'ad a likin' for the country mysel', and w'en it gets a bit dried up in the town we jus' clears out on it; but I 'm thinkin' I could no' stop anywheres now.' The road has fatally beckoned many a countryman to try the great adventure of town life. The sign-post has pointed it out to him for years. Occasionally in a bad winter one meets them by the way, and longs to turn them back; but they have taken to the road. As I look at the helpless infants clinging round the pram, which is crammed with the last relics of the old home, I wonder how they will stand the kerbstone-rearing after the hedgerow. Will they be returning years hence as 'travellers,' very changed and besmirched? The call of the country comes too late. They will be wanderers for the rest of time. I have a theory that most of these 'travellers' are Earth's own children, seized away while still at the

breast. Sometimes I found that it was two or three generations back that these folks' people lived on the land; sometimes it is in oblivion and beyond proof. Yet names and faces betray local origin, too. These people have a quaint motley of trades: often you will find they are skilful tinkers, basket-workers, or perhaps they can resole boots. Can it be that they are the folk whom the town tradesman has supplanted? Once these people might have found indispensable and permanent work in the village. There is no longer any room for them. The organisation of the medieval village community instinctively rises to one's mind. Are these folk perhaps the homeless representatives of the village cobbler, smith, or cutler of old; or are they the folk who would be living in their huts on the edge of the common, 'cutting faggots within a coppice,' killing the pig which they had fattened all the year, and keeping company on the road with robbers, though 'not altogether such as they'? Are not many of these people perhaps the modern descendants of the 'sturdy beggars' whom the land changes turned hutless and portionless on to the road? They have not yet found a

place. But it is as if Time were having her vengeance and Mother Earth exacting the uttermost farthing for the sins of their fathers who insulted her by turning their backs. These unattractive figures are like ghouls haunting the old land, even seeking shelter in the roofless cottage which perchance was once their people's home.

Among this depressing crowd are many odd figures who are really townsmen out on holiday. In the spirit of their luckier brethren they are determined to spend the hot summer out of town. In some of the most beautiful spots in England I have come face to face with caricatures that would seem only real 'on the halls.' Can you picture George Robey attired for his famous turn, 'Archibald, certainly not!' picking gooseberries, or black currants at 9d. a 'half,'—or a second-rate 'tragedy queen' flaunting in some old stage purple plush with a picture-hat in broad sunlight down a row of scarlet runners? Even the birds become used to it, and these bird scarers have to use their lungs as well as their eccentricities. On their peregrinations through the lanes they have sometimes thought it no robbery, in the true

spirit of the man who has an appropriate suit for every occasion, to exchange their town garments for the less soiled and more suitable attire of some real scarecrow. ‘‘Av yer a bit of a ol’ coat, sir, or anythink o’ that sort?’ I have often been asked: and they certainly have a wonderful knack of combining these ‘bits,’ which would put Pantaloon himself to shame; though in begging garments they do not pay enough attention to the relative heights of the borrower and giver! I think there is yet plenty of scope for our music-hall stars to find fresh matter in gesture and attire if only they cared to study Earth’s oddments and deformities in these surroundings. ‘They be right comical lookin’, some o’ these chaps,’ remarks the countryman.

The casuals settle down in tool-sheds and outhouses as if they were taking a country villa; they even nail up pictures and trumpery ornaments in their circumscribed dwellings, and I have had the postman deliver letters at the farm addressed: ‘Mr. Jones, Washpool Villa,’ and ‘Mr. Hawkins, River View,’ respectively a tool-shed by the pond and a four-wheeled hut in the meadow by the stream. A new and

dirty little figure presented itself at the village school one morning. 'And where do you come from?' asked the schoolmaster. 'Please, sir, the turkey pen,' was the unconsciously natural reply; and year by year this little maid's family returned to the turkey pen—a little smaller than a bathing machine—as if it were their country seat. All the travellers 'lie rough,' some in specially prepared shanties—insisted on by authority, yet suggestive of the cattle pens at the county show—others in barns and lofts. One village barn accommodated over a hundred of them, until apparently the discomfort to the villagers was so great that the contented casuals were ejected. I have found them lying night after night under the same hedge or sheltering tree; I have seen a family huddling on a drenching night around a smouldering fire of sticks, waiting to crowd like sardines into a tiny mule-cart spanned over by two bent sticks and a greasy canvas. We avoid the outsheds for many months after the invasion has departed: there is so much dirt and unpleasantness with these people, though in some respects they are highly particular: 'As for ol' Jim, 'e says as 'ow 'e never could wash

in col' water all 'is life'; and many of them would no more eat an apple without wiping it on a greasy coat-sleeve than dream of paying house rent. 'There be plenty o' water about, too, and I can't see why they won't keep themselves cleaned up a bit,' remarked one of the regular farm hands. 'Why, bless you,' jested another, 'them be too intimate friends and companions with they crawleys to wash 'em off! You jes' watch old Jane, 'ow careful she be if they bites a bit too hard. She jus' turns 'em over on their backs for a bit.' There is something especially revolting in finding this squalor at the very breasts of Mother Earth, and it is the irony of fate that where the land yields her greatest increase these folk are usually gathered together.

I am told that some folk associate this squalor, dirt, and ignorance with all country people, and that they see no distinction between the 'traveller' and the day labourer. I have even had the casual cattle drovers who ply between the farms and town on market days held up to me as typical country folk.

There is good material, however, among the 'travellers' if only it could be steadied and

organised. There are families who would succeed in the country and do credit to it if they could only learn the lessons of thrift and personal pride, which home life alone could teach them. But they have no real homes, no responsibility. Their services are only required temporarily, unless indeed we are going to employ more labour on the land again, or give families more chance of earning an independent or semi-independent livelihood off a plot of ground. In some districts I know farmers could find them permanent work if there were housing accommodation. A few of these folk have the real call of the road in their ears: they will come, strange people, with fine faces and good manners, sometimes readers and scholars, and one wonders why they have sunk so low. They work well, but on a day one finds them gone in a night without warning, without other reason than I know except that the call has come once more. I have seen a whole invasion clear off in two or three days in a bad summer. Others really have the love of home in them. I know one family that came to our farm for years, but each year they became more drunken and

rowdy, until one year when they arrived they were told they were not wanted. It even becomes dangerous to our ricks and outbuildings. The man cried and whimpered like a child: he finally offered to sign the pledge if we would only let him stay in the turkey house; but it was no good, he eventually had to take to the road. There was one woman in particular whom we all wanted to keep in the country. I never knew her as anything but 'Mary Anne and her little girl.' The father was a factory worker, but every year 'Mary Anne and her little girl' came to the farm and worked with a will. They put many of our own countrywomen to shame, and they had all the simplicity and cheerfulness which spoke of a summer's day. Throughout the summer one would constantly see knots of 'travellers' temporarily 'on strike' for a $\frac{1}{2}d.$ more per bushel, or $\frac{1}{4}d.$ extra an hour. It was a strange sight to see our own countrywomen falling into line, and learning from the townsman how to grumble, for the 'travellers' always grumble, and often strike without good cause. But the red-haired, freckled 'Mary Anne and her little girl' were still in the field, and slowly and surely outstripped the others.

She had a cheery word whatever work she was at, and always got the invitation to come back next year, 'and bring as many more like yersel' as you can find nex' time'; I heard the foreman tell her.

It is quite odd for a month or two to see the country adopting town methods. Not only do the townsmen bring the strike with them, but they initiate a system of 'tally men' and 'gangers,' an organisation of work and a division of labour which savours very much of the factory. Perhaps the green hop or fruit alleys, too, become numbered and marked like the black alleys whence they came. There may even be the strange figures of the baked potato and fried fish man! It is like the old harlequinade at Drury Lane, full of surprises and incongruities.

There is something wrong from the countrymen's point of view about this annual invasion, and from Nature's standpoint something not a little pathetic. The countryman has toiled from cultivation to sowing, from sowing, through the stress of cultivation again, to ripening. Then, just when Earth's lap is full, down swarm the locusts; they tear off the year's plenty and

vanish again, having absorbed the country's surplus prosperity. The village as a whole is not much better off for harvest time, though every one has made 'some extra and overtime'; and many farmers, it is true, do their best at harvest and picking time by giving bonuses or Michaelmas money to their regular hands. But much of the harvest plenty, when the farmer feels he can pay more as he looks at his laden trees and ripening corn, goes in making casual wantons drunk and riotous for a few weeks. One longs to see the country more self-sufficing at these times. The countryman himself feels the injustice, and much of his jesting and criticism is directed against the 'foreigners.' It is an insult to Earth Mother that these travesties of human life should be delegated to harvest her plenty. But there are certain operations in farming for which we require 'cheap' labour. We cannot afford to employ the time of skilled labourers over certain things—we want them for more specialised jobs; and so it is we fall back on the 'traveller' to fill the gaps which depopulation has left in the village. If more families remained as a whole on the land, working their holdings, the spasmodic

demand for this kind of labour might well be supplied in the village itself. Then the 'cheap labour' which absorbs so much money for a brief period and wrests it from the countryside might be dispensed with. Then the labourers' own families might be benefiting from more of that profitable piece-work when, for a few months in the year only, it is possible to supplement their paltry wage. The foreman's view, too, is practical. 'It be real disheartening,' he said to me as he stood totting up the week's figures in the casuals' wage book—"It be real disheartening finding work for these chaps and then givin' 'em good money. There be chaps here as be drawing more in a week than I ever draws. There be old Duncan here—well, 'e and 'is wife and nipper draws 2*l.* 16*s.* this week. It's sometimes more and sometimes less. That bes right enough if they know'd wot to do with it, but afore the week's out they be borrowin' on wot they draw nex' week. They 've no rent to pay, neither, and no taxes; it ain't as if they spends much on food; they 've no position or respectibility to keep like, and yet 'alf on 'em goes on the parish or starts begging in the streets the day they leaves 'ere. They expect

other people to keep 'em through the winter, 'cos they goes and gets drunk every night, and makes beasts o' themselves. They 've no sense o' pride nor responsibility like at all; I can't understand it.' 'Ah, they be the sort of chaps,' said another labourer to me, 'as won't do no work as long as the money lastes'—but it does not last long, for they are usually 'Guzzle guards' (drunkards) as they are, contemptuously called. 'An' the day they leaves 'ere you'll see 'em a griddlin' all through the streets, an' a fine row and sight they makes, too.'

And so the winter comes, and Mother Earth washes her face again and forgets all about this pageant of mixed comedy and pain.

CHAPTER XII

NEIGHBOURS ON VIXEN'S HILL

A RANGE of wooded hills invades the flat plain from the north; here and there half-hidden churches and hamlets creep up the sides and nestle in the trees. I spent many leisure hours wandering round these villages, the quaint family of Holts that spoke of bygone days of abbot and prior, sheriff and reeve. One afternoon I walked farther and higher than usual and found myself at an open clearing some three miles west of Sheriffs' Holt. I was on Vixen's Hill, at the south-west end of the Holt Hills, which were quite precipitous on this side, and commanded a wide view of the valley and distant hills and a vast dome of sky. I thought I had left all human habitations behind, but here, just on the clearing which I viewed across a field of ripening corn, stood two cottages facing out across the plain. This

is a spot to linger in, and I know if some scholar gipsy passed this way he would forsake his wanderings and rest awhile. The air was so buoyant that one seemed pressed heavenwards to the huge spaces above: it was like the sensation of diving to the bottom of a cold and limpid pool. The two cottage roofs communed together in their loneliness like some Laon and Cythna resting on the high cliff and dreaming their ideal Islam. It seemed a place of freedom and peace, for some perhaps a place of wider knowledge and new perception. It was several weeks later when I was working with 'the gang' that I heard of Vixen's Hill again. I mentioned the Holts, and one old man of the plain ventured the remark, 'Ay, them be right out o' civ'lisashin there—that's wot they bes—might as well go straight off to Orstralee' (Australia). The man I was working with—whom, by the way, I had noticed was nicknamed 'Fox'—laughed and replied, 'We be all right up on Vixen's 'ill, that we be: four years' rent ain't such a bad takin' from 'alf an acre'; and the discussion turned on 'Fox's' luck. The two cottages on Vixen's Hill immediately came into my mind. 'Then do

you come five miles to work every day from the Holts ?' I asked. 'Ay; there be good gardens on Vixen's 'Ill, none better in the neighbr'ood, and it be worth the walkin',' he replied. I questioned him further about his garden, and the upshot of it was that he invited me to Vixen's Hill Cottages next evening.

Now, of all 'the gang,' 'Fox' was the best-dressed, happiest looking man. He held himself like a soldier even after a hard day's work; he had always a merry twinkle in his eye and was ready with a smart reply. I began to wonder if Vixen's Hill were not really a resting-place for Laon and Cythna, and if the spaciousness of the surroundings had influenced both physical and mental being.

It was evening when I got to the foot of Vixen's Hill, and I called in at a cottage to ask if there were a short cut to Roberts's cottage, for such was 'Fox's' name. I was less than two miles from where my friend lived, but the cottagers had 'never heard of him,' a circumstance which no longer surprises me in the country now I know the ways of countryfolk. I have often asked a man at one end of the village street to direct me to a neighbour at

the other and been told, 'I never heard on 'em, sir.' On one occasion I was staying in a cottage where the family had lived eight years, and in conversation the wife happened to say quite simply that she 'really must go down to the end of the village some day and see what it looked like!' On another occasion I remember asking a man I was talking to who so-and-so was as he passed by: my friend was 'just a wonderin' himself.' Both men had lived in the village over ten years, and I afterwards discovered the unknown stranger was almost the oldest labouring inhabitant.

I found my way to Roberts's cottage; he was awaiting me at the door with 'Let's come around afore it's too dark.' He had a very good half-acre garden, stocked with some forty plum and apple trees which he told me brought him a clear profit every year, 'and this year I made four years' rent out on 'em, let alone the vegetables.' He showed me round with as much pride as the squire would show his maze of clipped yew or water-garden, but this half-acre was of vital importance to him: it just gave Roberts that margin beyond the 'subsistence line' which enables a man to look

up and live. ‘ ‘Ere we grows enough ‘taters for the year, and ‘ere be the parsnips as makes my winter pig-food, and the missus never lacks for green stuff all through: we ‘as plenty to sell. We fattens two pigs a year. ‘Ere I ‘m just a-puttin’ up a fowl-pen for twenty pullets. Yes, it’s as good a bit of garden as I knows, and a blessin’ to a man, and I does well on it. It all works in together, the pigs keep the groun’ in good ‘eart, and the groun’ grows the pig-food, and we cures our own bacon. All I ‘m wantin’ ‘s a bit o’ groun’ to grow my own straw and maybe a bit o’ wheat. I can’t get no straw from the farmers nohow in a year like this, but there don’t seem no gettin’ more land. Ay, we ‘d be pretty independent ‘ere then, not that we ain’t pretty independent like now. We makes our own drinks up ‘ere—plum jerkum’s good stuff—and rhubarb beer. Come in and ‘ave a rest and a drink, and I ‘ll put you on the path over the ‘ill. Ay, it’s a way from work, but there ain’t ten such gardens in the district or there ‘d be a bit more content; and it’s fine up ‘ere, too, sometimes; it be the sort of view worth lookin’ at.’

I entered the old beamed kitchen: there was

a large open chimney and a wood fire, before which, on a sheepskin, lay three small children drying themselves in the glow after their bath. Mrs. Roberts, a tall, sunburnt woman, came forward with a high-back wooden chair and a jug of rhubarb beer. I sat and talked of the children and the cottage. There was another boy who lived three miles away with his grandmother, both to be near the school and because the cottage was not large enough—and ‘besides, excepting Saturdays, I’m out all day a hop or pea picking and takes the little ’uns with me, and three’s enough to mind. If I goes out for the day and leaves them at ’ome I can’t get no one to come in unless I pays ’em to do it, which don’t seem right, some’ow.’

‘Who are your neighbours?’ I asked. ‘You must be pretty dependent on them right up here.’ ‘What! Don’t you know? Ol’ Bill’s next door,’ replied Roberts. ‘And what neighbours they be, too!’ burst in his wife: ‘always a-drinkin’ and quarrellin’; it’s real unpleasant and I’d often as soon ’ave the cottage full o’ rats. There they be to-night, now, gone off to town and ’ll come back drunk as lords. It’s the same every Saturday night;

and they locks the children out and don't get back till ten or 'alf past. No, them be no 'elp to we, and always worrying for bread and suchlike, too.' I knew Bill Gibbon well as the most ragged and sickly-looking member of the gang. He had all the advantages of Roberts, and was the exact contrast. His garden was almost a waste in places, though even he more than paid his rent from it; he himself was the picture of misery. I stepped out into the darkness with a keen sense of disappointment.

I passed across the meadow to the road. At the stile I found five little figures—Bill Gibbon's family. I sat astride the stile and talked to the eldest, a thin, wild-looking boy of about eleven, with very bright eyes and flushed complexion. 'No, surr, I ain't at sc'ool; they won't 'ave I. I ain't bin these two year. They says I've got the 'sumption and mustn't go, so I stays at 'ome and does as I likes.' I remembered that the cottages were very small and that open windows were not common; I could not help peering through the dusk into the faces of the other four: the trade-mark of the disease was apparent. 'Do you play with the children next door?' I asked. 'Wot!

with them folks,' replied my little informant: 'Wy, Mr. Roberts 'e's always as drunk as a lord; 'e's drunk now, and Mrs. Roberts 'as just burned 'is best clo'se to pay 'im out.' I had been with the Roberts's all the evening so I knew this was a lie, but it made me realise even more fully the feeling which existed between cottage neighbours. Here was a youngster getting his education in village life!

One of 'the gang' had often said to me that he would 'jus' like a cottage as you could walk right round,' and I think he summed up the social feeling of the countryside. It is not a mere desire for aloofness; it is a feeling of suspicion, perhaps even of dislike. At any rate, the neighbour is the peg on which to hang the village scandal. The serious aspect of this is apparent when the village comes up as a picture before our eyes. The village is a unit in which every one should count for something. We villagers are so completely dependent on each other for our work, our amusements, our social life.

I remember coming down to breakfast one morning to find my landlady in a great state of excitement over some incident which she

was evidently burning to relate. She told me with pride how she had seen the Wills's next door plant out all their cabbages the day before ; that morning my landlady had risen early in time to watch the neighbours' fowls break loose and devour the plants wholesale, 'and it was such fun to watch them pullin' up them things that I wasted a whole hour and near died of laughing !' It is these trivial incidents which illustrate my point. On another occasion I was sitting talking to a fine specimen of a woman smallholder when she made some bitter remark about 'them nex' door.' I asked for an explanation and got the following reply : 'It was the las' week as Brewer, my 'usban', was alive ; 'e was taken bad very sudden one night, an only me and Liza with him. So I 'ad to send Liza four mile for the doctor. Well, when 'e comes 'e says as Brewer must 'av a bottle o' medicine. I asks 'im 'ow we's to get it, as it were full late for Liza to go out again, and he looked roun' quite angry like and says, "Ain't there still no men in Lumpton ?" and I says to 'e as I didn't know of none as would do Brewer and me a good turn ; so out 'e goes and knocks nex' door and asks Mr.

Smith. Mr. Smith said 'e'd go, so 'e fetched the bottle o' medicine, but Brewer 'ad gone too far. Well, the day after Brewer's funeral I goes down to the landlord to pay the rent for Brewer's 'olding as we 'ad. "Oh," says the lan'lord, "so I 'ears as Brewer is dead and you want to give up the 'oldin." "An' who told you that?" asks I. "Me an' Brewer's children 'as got to live, and we wants Brewer's 'olding and means to keep it w'ile we can pay the rent for it." "Oh," says the landlord; "Mr. Smith comed in the other night on 'is way to fetch some med'cin, and 'e said as Brewer was dying, and 'e would like the 'oldin', so I promised it to 'e." "Well," says I, "I 've got Brewer's 'oldin' and I means to keep it"; and I still works Brewer's land, and that's ten year ago now.'

As I woke from my reverie on the stile the moon had just broken through a cloud, and once more light filtered round that vast diameter. Here, from the very doorstep of disappointment I seemed to see a gleam of hope. The multitudinous radii of creation surged to the centre, and I seemed only at the beginning of things. Moving about the hills and valleys I could see a sturdy race of giants bred in the

spaciousness of peace and understanding ; they were but my mates endowed by the ages with a fuller strength to live and grow. On Vixen's Hill I had seen what the hills could breed, what freedom could give ; I had seen, too, how human nature could distort it. In the country we must be neighbourly, or we can never hold our own with other industries and countries. If our small men are to be free they must co-operate and realise first the reciprocity of the thing. It is to make life easier for himself ; it is to give himself an hour of leisure : then, when the struggle is not to 'exist' but to prosper, he will see an ever-widening diameter ; his view will become less circumscribed, it will comprehend the next cottage, the village, the parish, until he finds himself standing on such a centre as I tried to describe on Vixen's Hill. There is much to be overcome—incredulity, ignorance, and suspicion ; but when the countryman sees the cottages rising, the market working or the goods cheapening, he is forced to believe his eyes ; some even will be pioneers themselves. Village life decayed through a series of social and agricultural changes—the end of the 'common' system, the new order of squire,

parson, agent, and the 'county' set. There are noble exceptions, but every man has not taken his full share of responsibility in country life. The countryman has no real friend, he has no influence to lighten his burden. The struggle to exist must be converted into a desire to live: then will dawn a wide and ever-widening sense of the proportion of things, of one's own importance in village life, of the scheme of creation and one's position in the 'Whole.'

CHAPTER XIII

‘ THE MAN IN BLACK ’

IT is not difficult to keep the plough straight on a sandy loam; the work is epicurean to the novice; but on a flinty bit of ground, where the share comes in contact with stones as big as one's head, causing the plough to jump, even the old hands find every muscle strained in keeping the furrow.

Criticism of any existing and recognised order of things savours to me of this latter type of ploughing, but I had hardly realised towards what a stony drift I was working until a friend put the question to me one day: ‘ There's not going to be any indoor religion in your book, is there ? ’ Though the question be ever so controversial it is a matter so vital that it cannot be shelved; for, after all, the representative of religion in the village is still to some extent ‘ the Person ’ in such a community. That he is not more ‘ the person,’ that he does

not more frequently grasp his true position are facts which I think my country friends' remarks will show very largely to be the cause of religious apathy in the countryside. Just as when the squire realises his obligations to his tenants in the widest sense, so, when the parson sounds the true temper of his flock, the results are such that they make all those desirous of seeing a renewed country life impatient of the many conspicuous failures which seem to bar the way to a strong and general advance. From both squire and parson who are working with the great cause at heart—and I know there are many—I must ask forgiveness for any unpleasant generalisations which may creep into these pages. As a fellow-worker, of a very different faith from my own, but with identical objects and ideals at heart, once wrote to me: 'We need every sort of shaped tool to reach down into all kinds of queer holes,' so I hope all true countrymen can work together on a common ground for the revival of our country life. We need every effort, every enthusiasm.

A few of my country friends still practise their religion as a reality, though rather as a

thing to be kept apart from everyday life and social intercourse. A far greater number are purely apathetic and only cultivate religion when it is convenient. ‘ I went to church reg’lar for three Sundays afore I asked the parson for a bit more of the glebe,’ said a smallholder to me with a wink, ‘ and w’en I be caught poachin’ that time, I went to ’e ag’in and asked ’im to look after the wife and little ’uns while I did my time, as I couldn’t pay the fine. O’ course I know’d as ’e ’d pay it.’ There are many who will weigh the merits of church or chapel after investigation into the respective blanket, coal, or bread clubs. There is too much calculation about their religion, too much of the ‘ what we can get ’ materially, no realisation of it as a talisman to a spirit life, as a means of expressing our union with the one creation. There is an ever-growing number of toilers on the land as bitter as Saul Kane, who would like the courage and eloquence to be able to rail with him against the parson :

I don’t believe in prayer nor Bible,
They ’re lies all through, and you ’re a libel,
A libel on the Devil’s plan
When first he miscreated man.

You mumble through a formal code
To get which martyrs burned and glowed.
I look on martyrs as mistakes,
But still they burned for it at stakes ;
Your only fire 's the jolly fire
Where you can guzzle port with squire,
And back and praise his damned opinions
About his temporal dominions.
You let him give the man who digs,
A filthy hut unfit for pigs . . .
You let the squire do things like these,
You back him in 't and give him ease,
You take his hand, and drink his wine,
And he 's a hog, but you 're a swine.
For you take gold to teach God's ways
And teach man how to sing God's praise ; . . .
But quite your damndest want of grace
Is what you do to save your face ;
The way you sit astride the gates
By padding wages out of rates ;
Your Christmas gifts of shoddy blankets
That every working soul may thank its
Loving parson, loving squire . . .
O, what you are, and what you preach,
And what you do, and what you teach
Is not God's word, nor honest schism,
But Devil's cant and pauperism.

At best I do not find relations very cordial
or intimate between the cottagers and the
village clergy ; they are anxious to keep their
vicar at arm's length : ' Beware o' the man in
black, that 's wot I always says,' is an expression

I have heard frequently ; and, if one man wishes to insult a mate, he as likely as not greets him with, 'Lor', Bill ! you looks jus' like a parson this mornin', and I 'm 'anged if you 'd be any better ner the rest on 'em !' Efforts on the part of the vicar to establish clubs and reading rooms are looked upon with suspicion as being guided by political or sectarian motives. One hears very curious and unreasoning criticisms, but they all go to show the trend of feeling : ' Ay, ay, you mus' beware of the man in black ; sure eno,' I never met a good 'un yet. Sure 'e 'll be roun' about Easter time to get thee to church for Easter offerin'. Las' year 'e took a 'oliday on it, though we be deservin' of a 'oliday a good bit more 'an 'e. If I baint wrong, I 'm thinking he 'll be wantin' some money for a new addishin to the family. 'E keeps the pramb'lator full. I don't see why we should keep 'is lot a-goin'.' One of my particular friends remarked to me one day : ' I can't think as why the other chaps goes on about the parson so. They 've always got their knife into the parsons. They may most on 'em be Tories, but they does a lot 'o good in their way and spends a good bit o' time and

money too. The chaps are a bit unreasonable in what they expects.' My friend was quite right, but even his loyalty regarded religion from a curious standpoint.

I do not think most of these countryfolk have much conception of religion as a personal and vital thing apart from parish politics. At best I fear religion signifies to them a stereotyped code of morals which endows its adherents with respectability, or it may be that they look upon it as a kind of co-operative society for mutual aid in material things, inspired by business considerations. But as a life in itself, as the great quickener of our thoughts and aspirations, as the best means of union with an infinitely Great Idea, yet infinitely human and real, they do not seem to grasp religion. As the ideas of sacrifice and supernatural were eliminated from English religion, the parson became more and more the relieving officer, the local representative of an organised state, the paid guardian of a national respectability, the village censor of men and morals. The conception of the priest as the essential man, the mediator, healer, comforter, father, the supremely needed person in the

village vanished, and as he ceased to fulfil his functions of relieving officer according to the lights of the labourer, so his position became all the more unjustifiable in his eyes.

For this curious misapprehension, misunderstanding, and lack of spontaneous religion there must be some explanation. I am often told that we Englishmen are not a religious people. History disproves the statement; though I am willing to admit that many of us have inherited from our Norman ancestors the talent for exploiting it and weighing it commercially. Our towns, too, to-day disprove it. They are the centres of a keen, revived religious life. In many parts of the country our villages disprove it, where some nonconforming body has placed its rival Bethel. In rural districts where I have found any vital religious life, it has almost invariably centred around the chapel and not round the national church. The striking incidents that I recall of religious fervour and expectation have always been where I least sought them — among my sturdy smallholder friends who are perchance lay preachers, or in the most secluded villages where the minister has slipped into the shoes of squire

and parson in their absence or has supplemented their merely weekly ministrations. I remember journeying from my own village twenty miles, and talking with many villagers on my way. When they heard whence I came several of them seemed quite excited, though they had never moved in a twenty-mile radius from their own homes. But out of my village had gone forth to them a preacher. 'Perhaps, then, you be knowin' young Mr. Ralph and may tell us 'ow 'e be?' 'Yes, I know him well, and he is making a good thing out of his holding; but how do you come to know him?' 'Well,' was the reply, 'it be three year agone now since 'e came roun' a-preachin' at the chapel, but 'e spoke that well and good that we 'a been lookin' for 'is comin' back nigh ever since.' On the road I met a wagoner, an old friend whom I had not seen for five years, as he had left my district for a new job. There were six rosy faces peeping up from the side of the wagon, and two strapping lads with prongs over their shoulders by his side, while a bonnie lass of fifteen or so carried a basket of tea. 'It looks as if you've brought the family up all right,' I said; 'I need hardly ask after them.' 'Ay, ay,' was the reply; 'there be twelve on

'em now and six out to work; but the blessing be's that they be all God-fearin' and good chapel folk like them as brought 'em up. That be the joy to me.' In his chapter on 'The Country Sunday,' Jefferies drew a picture of the deadly earnest of these chapel folk in their 'grimly real religion.' He saw the joylessness and sunlessness of it as pictured in the 'red-bricked crass building.' But here as elsewhere we must take what Jefferies says with caution, remembering his bias against Christianity and his inveterate pessimism. Even the church spires, those silent witnesses of man's soaring hopes, appear to him but blots upon the landscape. But what he describes is a very real society, a very real life, and it belongs to the people.

Apart from this—and the movement is yet very spasmodic and local—apathy reigns, except where that apathy is aroused to resentment by what countryfolk deem to be sectarian persecution on the part of those in power. I know of landlords who still make religion a test for tenancy. The trouble comes from within and without: it seems to me that in so far as the labourer has any formulated idea of what the

religious representative should be, that idea is a primitive one. It embraces poverty, the sharing of goods, spontaneous acts of charity, personal friendship, devotion to the interests of the local poor. They are thinking in terms of themselves entirely, trying to construct an ideal sympathetic with their own lot. They are unable to realise their parson as in any sense a symbol—a symbol of something to be honoured—they are apt to be grudging. For the most part the village has come to regard the parson only as another form of squire, but a squire who in some way is not living up to his profession. ‘They gets up and preaches to we, “Blessed are the poor and them as be contented,” but they ’m never know’d wot ’tis to be poor; and, bless you, they ain’t much to be discontented of with their parsonage and ’undred acres glebe.’ This is an unreasoning criticism. There are many rich country livings and vicarages that almost shame the county houses, but we all know that there are very many vicarages where poverty is as near their door as that of the cottage. The parson often has a great struggle to keep up his position in the ‘county’ and his family. Of course the ancient endowments

never contemplated either, and are insufficient for their present use. We have passed the age when we can allay the discontent and dull the ambitions of the countryman by preaching the virtue and saving grace of poverty and contentment. Of what use is it to preach this, even though it be true, to people whose conditions are wellnigh desperate? These folk can no longer be ‘kept in their proper station.’ Of course it is only too true that the country rectory is very often the stepping-stone to ‘county society.’ The clergy almost naturally throw in their lot with people of their own education and point of view but not without dire neglect of any intimate knowledge of cottage life from within. The parson cannot run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. It is hard to accept a college or ancestral living and with it to renounce as purely secondary the social life which has led up to it. Too many men take the gift lightly; they never realise they are becoming shepherds of a flock which it will take years of patience and self-effacement to understand. Real vocation alone can suffice. The country living and its glebe, a cure bound up with

the land and supported by it, should draw a man down to the level of the soil. It calls for a pastoral priesthood primarily. But the overworked scholar, the worn-out townsman, the social star are only too often given charge of the village and its peculiar secrets. If the successful village parson is not a born countryman he is usually a born saint in sacrifice and self-effacement. The institution of glebe sounds almost an ideal means of furnishing a common meeting-ground between the villagers and their vicar. He, too, may be the little man on the land, who lives off the land, and knows its changing vicissitudes. Surely it should entwine his fortunes with those of the village. But the glebe has come to be looked on as the personal estate. It rather gives the incumbent the status of the landed gentry. Inevitably in our day it has to be administered for profit like the estate of any other landlord. As a rule the vicar does not work his own land to a profit: he lets it. Perhaps it is too much to expect the clergy to be at once expert agriculturists and masters of souls—though indeed in the past such has often been the case, and in Catholic Belgium to-day, where the priestly

dignity is held high, the clergy have taken on themselves the pioneer work of agriculture, and those destined for country cures are trained in agriculture as well as the sacerdotal state. It is a means of bridging over the gulf, of bringing the shepherd to an intimate knowledge of his flock and of their interests and the great influences that mould their lives. So he can make full use of their environment by touching it with the magic of the unseen. In England we are apt to let this gulf widen, and make no effort to let religion work side by side with the practice of daily life; we are apt to fall back upon the routine of morning and evening prayer, with the infrequent perambulation and duty call at every cottage door. The countryman seems to resent the letting of the glebe being made a business concern; it is as if his mind went back to the pre-Reformation days when he had right and expectation of his share in the tithes and the beneficent administration of great ecclesiastical landlords, or in the sympathy of the mendicants. I was talking with a group of farm hands about the possibility of obtaining more land in the parish for small holdings. ‘ What about the glebe ? ’ I ventured. ‘ Ay,

the glebe be all let out in small 'oldings all right! Every bit on it. I remembers as w'en the glebe fetched 17s. an acre and no more—don't you, Bill? And then the day came as we wanted land: the parson, 'e got up in the pulpit as "the people's friend" and said as 'ow 'e 'd give 'is glebe to us for small 'oldings. Well, them 'oldings be fetching £3 an acre now, and never less than 30s. So "the people's friend" 'e wasn't exactly puttin' 'imself out for we! I reckon as if 'e could let to the farmer at 17s. 'e could let at 17s. to we. It wern't as if 'ed made any alterations or we didn't pay reg'lar like.' Now, small holdings nearly always command a bigger price in proportion, than large farms, yet the country people seemed to feel the parson ought not to be making profit out of 'his poor.' I think there is no doubt that this aspect of the parson-squire who awakes to his true position only at election times has brought misunderstanding. In the opinion of country-folk he is not credited with that freedom from bias granted to other men. It is instinctively felt that he is on the side of 'place and privilege.'

Besides this personal relation with the official

representative of religion, our usual apathy seems to me to be the result of the way in which religion has been presented to the countryfolk through a series of generations. The friend who asked me if I were going to introduce ‘indoor religion into’ my book had an intimate knowledge of the country. He seemed to voice unconsciously the very impression of religion in the mind of the country labourer. One day, as I was hoeing, I heard the bell of the village church ringing for daily service. ‘The wind’s gone round; how plainly one can hear the bell to-day,’ I remarked to my companion in the next row. ‘Ay; I likes to ’ear it; the idea of mornin’ and evenin’ prayer be right enough, though it be out o’ reach of us chaps out ’ere.’ I wondered why it had become so ‘out of reach.’ Thrice a day the peasants of other nations still know how to lift their hearts to make a simple confession of God on earth at the sound of a bell. But then these people constantly see the supernatural being taken into their daily lives; religion is literally carried into the fields, into the open air. The tinkling bell is heard through the country roads; the tiny spark of a lantern

carried by a peasant boy marks where the Great Healer is passing with unction and blessing. Religion stoops to bless the pregnant beast, the lamb, the honey bee, the corn, the vintage ; daily labour, the humble cottage, common things are sanctified and hallowed in a priceless store of blessings. Religion touches the drudgery of life with her magic : ' the overworld of spiritual forces ' becomes ' continuous with the underworld of natural forces.' Brief glimpses and suggestions of eternal beauty are there to remind the tired toilers of an eternal reason for going on. They are brought into an intimacy with something incomprehensibly great and beautiful. In the British fear of superstition and irritation at formality a great deal besides was swept away. Among other things the ' dailiness,' the homeliness, the open-air spirit of religion were banished. It was relegated to Sunday, to four walls and a beamed roof. It might no longer parade its splendid boast before all men. There is a natural craving in man for a humanising religion, for a bodily combined with a mental worship, in which all the senses may have a share. In a paroxysm of fanatical puritanism the poor and unfettered were robbed

of a living faith, and, externals having been dispensed with, few opportunities have been left for the countryfolk to cry,

O world invisible, we view thee;
O world intangible, we touch thee;
O world unknowable, we know thee;
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.

Enough is not made of the link that connects, of ‘the ladder pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.’ Maybe ‘The earth is a church where no bells are rung,’ but ‘Her beauty is slighted for want of tongue,’ and the countryman at least needs training to look for the majestic ‘All Beautiful’ who is daily before his eyes in vast types and homely sacraments. In other countries, without shame, the village carpenter goes with his bag of tools, the shepherd with a sickening lamb, to see their great Prototype where He is always to be found. I have knelt beside them as the odour of their toil went up—a humble incense—most acceptable to the Carpenter’s Son. Religion is failing to hold our countryfolk because it is failing to take up the pettiness of their lives and bring it into contact with something bigger. Of old the

countryman sought that something in the great natural forces alone :

The children of the old dark faiths went up
To worship there, and lit their altar fires
Upon the even cone of some green hill,
Whose very shape seemed pregnant to their eyes . . .
Of Him they sought—

He must bring worship to his native hills. We have relegated his worship to a building and a day ; we have separated it from his work and his environment. Once a year he may bring the fruits of the earth there, and return thanks to an exacting power, as it seems to him, for a harvest good or bad. Often have I heard the men discussing this formal thanksgiving as if it were an essential routine grudgingly given to a deity who in a year of dearth still demanded a mock gratitude. ' I reckons as there ought to be no 'arvest thanksgivin' this year ; there bain't a crop but 'av been a failure : there ain't much to be grateful for '—the same curious spirit of ' what we can get out of it ' lurking in their minds. Yet they have a superstitious belief in a deity ready to avenge. With great awe I was told the story of old Farmer

Warn, ‘a real wicked old man’ who, after a devastating attack of smut on the wheat, climbed the tallest tree on the farm on Harvest Thanksgiving Sunday, and took with him a bundle of diseased corn and a box of matches. Having set alight to the former, he brandished it heavenwards, asking the celestial occupant if He ‘bain’t right well ashamed of ’Isself for sending stuff like this.’ It struck me as a curious illustration of the attempt of a wild countryman to bring religion into some real relation with everyday life. One almost wished him a free pagan spirit again.

The village church is a complex paradox beyond the ken of the average villagers. One sees folk walk up the aisle to the pew appropriated to their house, and one tries to squash oneself mentally into the village pews at the back and watch ‘the gentry’ taking their apportioned station in the place where the humble are extolled and the mighty cast down from their seats. Flunkeydom is even to be seen at its worst flaunting itself here where the squire and guests from the great house are bowed into the lady chapel—now their ‘family

pew.' When the squire reads the Lessons or takes round the plate, there is still the bowing footman to open doors! It must be all very incomprehensible to the minds that take things rather literally at the back of the church. There is a formality here which keeps the peasant from taking hold of religion and making it his very own, and of opening his heart to the complaisant 'man in black.' Even as regards the very privileges of his church there appear to be grades. In most villages I have heard 'the communicants' spoken of as though they formed a clique apart. The villager holds back, shy and ashamed because of his ignorance. There seems but little sense of a spiritual family life in which each has his place through right and obligation.

'Yes, Brewer's a regular good church-goer now and a real force in village life,' said a clergyman to me when I expressed surprise at seeing a certain villager going to church. 'And how d'you think it all began? It was nearly two years ago now, and I was going to see his wife and family. He was cleaning out the pigsty and I got into conversation with him; he found I could give him a wrinkle or two

about feeding pigs ! Then he walked over to see my garden one night, and so things went on.’ It is not necessarily the sporting parson or the poultry fancier that the countryfolk like : it is the man who will go and share ‘ pot luck ’ with them, who will be hot for the rights of the village and keep it socially alive, and live as he preaches besides. ‘ I know as the man in black wouldn’ come to my door twice,’ growled an old labourer to me ; ‘ I don’t want none of ’is ranting and interferin’, a-coming jus’ w’en I wants to ’ave a bit o’ tea.’ This is the way the cottager looks at the duty call at intervals of six months. ‘ No, I ain’t ’ad a chance to speak to the parson these five months,’ I have had said to me more than once. In the country we need someone to keep us together ; days and weeks are long enough, months are too long to be absolutely alone. There has come to be a shyness in calling, because the countryman has become so reserved—a reserve which seems like hostile criticism. All he wants is that one comes in simplicity and with understanding. The parish visitor may be sent to fill in the gaps between the vicar’s calls, but there is a real desire for something spontaneous

and genuine from the heart to enter into cottage life. There is a very strong and not unnatural feeling that the parson sends his

. . . wife around to paint
The golden glories of 'restraint.'
How moral exercise bewild'rin'
Would soon result in fewer children.

A benevolent old lady came to pay her usual call on some cottage friends of mine just as the family of five were struggling to throw off whooping-cough. 'And wot d' you think she told we?' asked my friends in something like disgust mixed with contempt. 'She said as the children would never lose their coughs until we took them all to the sea for a change!' No wonder cottagers get irritated at interference, suspicious of patronage. In judging them how rarely do we put aside preconceived ideas; in advising them how little do we understand their small possibilities. They are simple people and can only understand simplicity. I recollect hearing a party of cottage women giving their simple appreciations after they had listened to a tale of the Life at Nazareth. These women came every week, dragging their babies, to listen to 'the little mother,' as they used

to call the farmer's daughter who read them some homely story with a big idea. ‘One goes about one's work so different some'ow a-thinkin' o' that Family.’

Looking at religion for its practical influence on village life, it is this big idea, this magic touch, this suggestion of possibilities that we need to revive. I say ‘revive’ purposely, because it is no idle dream that we set before us. Before the sixteenth century ‘many of the things that in these days advanced politicians would desire to see introduced into village communities of modern England, to relieve the deadly dullness of country life, were in full working order,’ as a great historian points out in referring to the Halmote Rolls of Durham. In some things we may look back as well as forward. Not only was the deadly dullness relieved, there was a sense of co-operation, of organisation, of unity and brotherhood. ‘The higher unselfishness or, as they are called, altruistic feelings’ which ‘alone can guarantee the survival of a nation’ could alone make for the village life of rural England. By losing Catholic unity we lost all sense of social corporateness, we became unneighbourly, suspicious, insular

even in our own village. I have touched upon villages to-day fired by some one man perhaps, or by a body such as the Society of Friends, where there is life, where men can work together and stand bravely for their village and their principles, whence men go out as prophets and pioneers strong in the knowledge of a great and wide life brought to them by contact with an idea bigger than themselves, bigger than their village. Then the countryman rises in his full strength; then he is freeman of all Earth's secrets. He can be poor, he can labour hard in the knowledge that he is living in the Great Whole and showing forth its wonders. When we look round on our villages as they are and see the lack of strong moral fibre in a wide world of open space, there is no denying the fact that religion may be used to engender narrowness and blindness where it should give us a universal bond, a common understanding; and the ancient lament rises to our lips:

‘The noble sons of Sion and they that were clothed with best gold, how are they esteemed as earthen vessels, the work of the potter’s hands.’

CHAPTER XIV

THEM AS OUGHT TO KNOW

‘DURATION is a continual progress of the past which gnaws into the future, and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation.’

This sentence of Bergson provides an inexhaustible plea for energy and optimism to all who are striving for the progress of civilisation and the fullest expression of humanity. The superficial characteristics of each age vanish; only the best endures, preserved by its essential utility in the evolutionary scheme. This is but part of the greater harmony of Nature who knows no ultimate waste of tissue; duration, incorporation, and the will ever to revitalise form her rule of life. Even if we would, we are powerless to destroy; we are forced into line with Nature. With this know-

ledge we can face boldly any problem of civilisation, confident that the good will justify and preserve itself.

Scattered throughout these pages are many references to the country landlords, the resident gentry, and the farmers. My mates would probably class with these the local doctor, the successful miller and corn merchant, the village schoolmaster, and sum them all up as 'Them as ought to know.' This title has two distinct notes—the note of uncertainty and unfamiliarity is blended with a note of deference and respect. On the whole I have found countryfolk rather too ready to admit themselves 'unlearned' and 'no scholars,' and to presuppose a ready intelligence amongst more favoured people. Their attitude towards 'them as ought to know' is very largely dictated in the first instance by their relation with their immediate master, the farmer. The labourer is not sensitive in the ordinary meaning of the word, but he has a wonderfully keen intuition. He can literally feel a man's attitude towards him. I have watched the process. 'One can't ever get quite at 'e some'ow: 'e 's a queer sort o' chap,' is a criticism I have often heard. There are no

folk more ready with immediate response than countrymen, but once they have suffered rebuff, like the snail they very rapidly withdraw into seclusion and are only coaxed forth again with exceeding difficulty. They are quick to judge from isolated incidents and to misinterpret all else in the same light. Thus, if their relations with the farmer are not good, it is probable that they will be ready to be 'up against' the squire—and vice versa. I remember an isolated incident settling for ever the reputation and popularity of a village schoolmaster. Had my friends possessed a greater sense of humour he might eventually have been forgiven. The new schoolmaster was a townsman, and on his arrival he chartered the services of a skilled village gardener to put his garden to rights. At the end of the week he asked the man what was his charge per day. Three shillings was the usual price for casual labour, but the labourer, hoping to make a bit out of a stranger, magnanimously said, 'Leave it to you, sir.' The innocent pedagogue, who had not yet learned to adjust his ideas about manual labour, suggested that eighteenpence was handsome reward. He has never been forgiven.

I have no wish to return to the century which Gilbert White describes, when ‘common farmers provide plenty of beans, peas, and greens, for their hinds to eat with their bacon; and those few who do not are despised for their sordid parsimony, and looked upon as regardless of the welfare of their dependents.’ But he is speaking of a public opinion and a mutual understanding which are almost lacking to-day. The days when ‘the hind’ lived in and ‘lay rough’ above the stable or cowbyre had the advantage of bringing the farmer into very direct relations with his men. Public opinion evidently demanded that the farmer should look after their welfare, and the labourer was generally devoted to the ‘maister and missus.’ A great change has come—for the better in that it has given the labourer the first step towards freedom and an independent home, but for the worse in that master and man no longer of necessity see eye to eye. They no longer hear the prospects discussed or see each other’s point of view. A good or bad farmer may often be the cause of prosperity or poverty to a country district, and the labourer is quick to recognise this. I have several times been into

parishes where one man had accumulated all the farms into his own hands, and not only the farms but the cottages; farming was at its worst—‘most of ’is farmin’ be stone-pickin’ and letting wot will, grow’—and wages were at their lowest ebb. I recall one village ‘where there be only two free cottages in the parish, and the folks as rents ’em gets a better wage elsewhere.’ Where such conditions as these exist, a grumbling, discontented village is the result. Every act of ‘them as ought to know’ is looked upon with suspicion and dislike; but it is rather the discontent arising from disappointment and dearth than any direct hostility. On the contrary, where there is a public-spirited farmer willing to work in with his men, on the whole I find the labourers appreciative. If that farmer is willing to take his share in village organisation and social life he is received enthusiastically. Where this is the case the villagers are only too anxious to recognise his superior ability in organisation and advice. I know farmers who are unobtrusively keeping the small men of their neighbourhood alive. For such men there are occasional outbursts of gratitude and public

demonstrations of affection which one would hardly expect from the stolid countryman. 'Ay, ay, we must make it a bit bright an' lively for 'em w'en they returns—show 'em it's a bit 'omely like,' explained a group of labourers to me when I discovered them, after hours, rigging up an archway of laurel and flowers and flags for the return of 'the maister and the new missus.' On another occasion some of the men told me they never used their vote—'not that 'e ever talks politics or tries to influence we like in any way, but I knows as 'e be t' other way o' thinkin' and I would no' like to 'urt 'is feelin's.' 'He's a real good master and I never wants to work for a better,' I have often heard said. No, the countryman is rather prepared to respect and like those who have been more fortunate than himself in birth, position, or education. It is just the same with the squire or the landlord if he has troubled to present himself as a human being to his tenants. It is because there has been no intimacy that my friends, like the Hill family, have come to look upon the better educated as a caste apart, to be 'bested' if possible. There is a certain pride in the countryman's

heart about his local gentry, the manor house and the park. Only listen to him telling an inquiring stranger about them. Bad feeling comes through personal experience, or, more often, total lack of it. The stockman in particular, who walks more in aristocratic circles and sees the country gentry on show days when their hearts and hospitality are freest, is very often 'one of the true blues.' Maybe because he has learned that there is something in pedigree! Stand round the show yard or sale ring and listen to the comments as the names of the winners and buyers come up. 'Ay, and there be another real 'ristocrat, 'ere's to 'is 'erd.' Then will come a chorus of approval and 'Ay, ay, and one of the best, too.' Perhaps a more venturesome herdsman will chime in 'Wot! Bill; you gone over to the Tory click?'—and again will come the chorus, 'Ay, and some of the bes' they be.' Country-folk rightly appreciate a 'gentry' whose enthusiasm is in the land and stock. But the countryman, too, has abstract ideas about a gentleman, as I learned to my cost one day. It happened this way. After temporarily managing a farm for a friend, I was asked on

his return if all had gone well. I replied in the affirmative—except that I was dissatisfied with the work and conduct of one man, though I had no definite accusations to make. I had shelved the question as I felt it was not my place to interfere, but my friend of course tackled the man, and I am glad to say cleared up the whole matter satisfactorily. Next time I met the man, after shaking hands, he asked if he might have a word with me. ‘Wot ’urt me mos’ of all was that you didn’t say nothing direc’ to me and give me a chance at explainin’. I always felt as a gentlemen were a chap like as would speak to a feller right out and give ’im a chance, and that ’urt me ’orrid bad.’ We talked the matter over and understood one another better, and he gave me his hand and renewed confidence with the same frankness with which he explained, ‘I wasn’t feelin’ at all kindly towards you afore I ’ad a talk with you, and it wasn’t no good lettin’ you think I did, but I quite sees as you was placed awk’ard.’ He possessed naturally the quality he sought to admire in others.

Yet there is no danger of the countryman becoming subservient—there is usually some-

thing to keep him healthily independent. Unfortunately the resident gentry have carried into the country something of town snobbery. Sam may no longer 'walk out with his girl' because her father has been made head groom. The coachman will not be on more than nodding acquaintance with the farm carter, and presumably their wives do not even know one another by sight! Years ago I lived in the dower house of a country mansion. Sometimes of an evening the head gardener would come in on his way home to give me some advice about the garden. One night I was proudly showing him two splendid beds of scented stocks and brilliant asters. With a sudden change of manner and in a very confidential voice, he remarked to me almost in a whisper: 'You'll excuse me, sir, for mentionin' it, won't you?—but you shouldn't have they. The top gentry don't grow them things now.' Even the flowers have taken on class distinction! There is just enough of this spirit abroad to keep the countryman from contended serfdom. But he has no idea of leadership, and he naturally looks for it from men who have had experience and public life. Week by week I joined in

the speculations of a gang of labourers as we worked together, discussing the possibilities in the new landlord who had just bought the estate. My companions' optimism and faith was infectious, and we built noble castles around a man who was to relieve the cottage famine, throw himself into the small holding movement, and give his surety for a credit bank. Only one man suggested of the newcomer, 'I guess 'e 'll be wantin' 'is rents like most on 'em'; he proved right, and the gang showed evident disappointment in finding no pioneer. This disposition on the part of the men is a hopeful sign for the future if only the leaders will come forward.

In 'Noblesse Oblige,' Sir Horace Plunkett, speaking with the full weight of experience and success, has shown how vital this co-operation of the educated classes is and will be to the agricultural movement in Ireland. In Ireland, we must remember, there was a real rivalry to be broken down between landlord and tenant before they could hope to work together; yet, with cool and magnificent optimism, the writer is confident of success. He points out how essential to the new rural

life will be a society which has the powers of organisation, the gifts of business experience and culture. Business co-operation will be only the first step, too, to a new social life. Sir Horace sees two ways in which all the resident gentry can help by 'individual acts of neighbourliness' and by 'participation in official work.' Rural revival will give magnificent scope and opportunity for men of all talents and shades of opinion to 'fulfil the true functions of an aristocracy.' Though England will probably never be the land of smallholders that Ireland is, surely all this is equally appropriate and even more probable in our own land. Mr. Arthur Rogers, in 'The Business Side of Agriculture,' has quoted Sir John Sinclair, the founder of the Board, as saying that agriculture requires on the whole a greater variety of knowledge than any other art. There is room here for the talent and experience of every one living in the country. The work need not only be confined to the men; indeed it has very truly been said that it is women chiefly who are concerned with the character of life, with its quality and well-being. To quote from the 'United Irishwomen,' the author says, 'To

women's influence I look for the brightening of the social sky in the grey dawn of peasant Ireland.' In England 'Mrs. 'Anns and the others' are badly needing a gentler sisterhood to help them. In the organisation of village life on its social side, in influencing the young generations in their love for the land, in finding means of entertainment, and even in the organisation of agriculture itself, there is a crying need for women workers.

There are three very distinct lines along which 'them as ought to know' have the opportunity of doing immense good: 'Firstly, the teachings of modern science must be applied to the practice of farming.' Every village and district would be the better off for a resident expert in chemistry, botany, zoology, or plant culture and disease. If each centre, for instance, had its own permanent exhibits of varieties of fruits, corn, grasses, and pests, practically labelled and explained, in time the monopoly of scientists would become the common truths of villagers. How many men could help in these and a hundred other ways, by giving their services to Government or to some recognised society for the purpose of spreading

agricultural knowledge, and if necessary by undergoing an efficient training for the purpose. At least every landlord might make it his duty to possess a working knowledge of his land, so that he need rely less on the ever-encroaching town lawyer-agent, whose sole duty is to exact rents and economise over expenses.

‘Secondly, the business of farming must be reorganised on co-operative lines.’ Even the great farmers have yet to learn that it is to their advantage at least to co-operate over such things as railway transit, uniform packages and weights, and even the buying of produce and machinery. In America they are not too big to do these things. Here again is work to be done by the man who has had business experience, or who has the talent for local government. Once more, it is hardly necessary to emphasise the importance of combining all voluntary effort under a central organisation—which is the spirit of co-operation.

‘Thirdly, the life of those who are to do this work must be socially and intellectually elevated, and made more attractive.’ Here is the opportunity for all those who have not

training in scientific work or organisation, yet who possess other gifts. But whatever help is offered must be given in a spirit of equality and comradeship, not of patronage. The fact must never be lost sight of that the gentry too will be gaining while they are giving. We all have much to learn from countryfolk. It is organised self-help, not pauperising assistance, which is going to revitalise country life. There is no reason why technicality, routine, and the business of life should always be divorced from the wider outlooks of civilisation, and even poetry. The ideal is at once to live and work well. There is a real work before 'them as ought to know' for which no government official can prove an adequate substitute. The countryman is always shy of the official and often a little contemptuous, but somehow he has retained a respect for the men whom one day he will rightly call 'Them as knows.'

CHAPTER XV

A VILLAGE GEMOT

I HAVE found a village where things have passed out of the hands of the 'man in black' and 'them as ought to know.' Here the destinies of a small community are shaped by the men in 'cords' and those that know the ever-changing face of Mother Earth through joyous and painful intimacy. This insignificant little spot, new and staring almost to ugliness, is the epitome of the life-struggle of bronzed, gnarled old men. It is the outpost of a new era; it is a new colony in the heart of an old land, but it is the very joy of the Earth Mother.

As I crossed the last ridge of downland towards the plain it began to grow dark. The sky was in one of her extravagant moods: her leaden-grey garment was splashed and streaked with patches of red and opalescent blue; the air seemed charged with some great conspiracy—

the soothing rustle of the wind was but a momentary lull—Nature must break from her silent course with magnificent demonstration of her power and passion. I hastened on. The first great tear of reluctant resolve hit my cheek. Another moment and earth was in revolt. All round the horizon there glistened the chain mail of her myriad bands. Then came the crashing command, and the whole world trembled in a burst of tears. A mile ahead across the open plain I could descry my only shelter—a low, darkened roof—which then somehow recalled to me that cottage on ‘the Heath’ where the great Russian democrats were wont to meet, and whence came those thundering manifestos to the people. Across the plain I fled while purple flamelets played and crackled round my handle bars like any child’s ‘snap-dragon’ dish on Christmas Eve. At last there was but a field between me and my shelter; a lamp burned from the single window now. I threw my bicycle into the hedge and made for the streak of light. ‘Bless me! you look like a kitten in a bucket o’ water!’ and before I knew where I was, a burly man was ripping off my jacket and buttoning a well-worn over-

coat around me. I found myself in a tiny wooden room furnished only with a table, some benches and a shelf for ledgers and books. There was an unlit oil stove in one corner, some pegs on the wall holding labourers' baskets and coats, and some dozen men sat round the walls on the wooden benches, pulling at clay pipes and exchanging smiles and jests. 'I'm afraid I've intruded on a——' I began, and then was at a loss to go on. 'No one 'll be mindin' givin' the gentleman a shelter for a bit, I'm sure,' interposed the man who had unceremoniously dragged me in, 'if he don't mind us concludin' of our business.' There was a general taking of clays from mouths and a murmur of assent, while one labourer near the pegs jumped up and produced a bottle from his basket with 'An' wot 's more is I've got a drop of rhubarb beer which 'll warm 'e up, if 'e don't mind a-drinkin' from this 'ere bottle. It be a terrible storm and eno' to go right through a man.' I expressed my gratitude, and as I settled myself in one corner of the room, I felt very glad inwardly that I was an expert at drinking from a bottle! From the business that was being transacted I soon gleaned that I

had burst in upon a local co-operative society, whose aims seemed to know no limits and whose object was certainly mutual aid. The present meeting had evidently been called to extend the scope of the society, which already bought and shared implements and seed-stuffs, to the combined sale of produce. 'As I've said once afore,' began an elderly man in the corner opposite to me, 'there'll 'ave to be a bit o' giv' an' take about the thing, an' a bit o' self-sacrifice too by way o' speakin'. It won't be no good if we only sends our worst stuff and the stuff we can't dispose of at better money. We've got to keep up a reg'lar supply, and we've got to make the Holesworthy growers knowed for good stuff. It may be temptin' w'en we gets good offers locally and p'r'aps things be fetchin' better prices at 'ome w'en we starts. I reckons as it will be a slow job a-workin' up a repitation, and there'll be a lot o' payin's out at first, and all them railway charges; but, once we're in, I'm thinkin' as we'll go ahead an' fin' a ready market for all we wants.' There was a momentary silence. 'Chaps mus' look into things,' began another man, 'and see as they be willin' to stand together and even see a bit o' loss the first year: it ain't as if there

were capital to back us. We've to stand or fall by ourselves.' 'I think as we all agreed to that las' meetin', Mr. Connibear, and them as be 'ere now be all willin' to run risks accordin' as they can—is that so, gennelmen?' There was a general 'Ay, Ay.' 'Then I think as we ought to get to details,' suggested the first speaker. So the question of marketing became a matter of practical politics. They had all been accustomed to sell locally, so they were not quite clear on the relative advantages of selling 'on charge' and 'on commission.' 'That be a point as one of us ought to look into,' suggested Mr. Connibear; and for the moment the conversation became local. As I happened to have a little knowledge of marketing, I engaged my next-door neighbour in conversation, and we began to clear up the matter in doubt. At the next pause he broke the silence with 'The gennelman 'ere be interested in these matters and says as 'ow——' Thus I was drawn into the conversation and, when business was concluded, we sat on, talking on general topics of village interest.

I asked so many questions about the society and the village that I unconsciously initiated a debate on very general lines. The business

meeting degenerated into a social club, and it was long past the usual country hour for 'lights out' when we looked at the clock. Every member seemed to contribute something to this meeting of wise men, and I discovered that this little parliament included representatives from several villages, though the members for Holesworthy predominated. They debated with a zest and clearness which not only taught me much of village problems in general, but which gave me a very definite picture of the conditions under which the individual speakers lived. Mr. Connibear was evidently the leader of Holesworthy, and the man who had come to my rescue, a Mr. Carter, undoubtedly was the young Elisha on whom the cloak would fall. There was one man who had not fought his way to a small holding, but had dropped into one. He had a better external education than the rest of the company, and for the sake of debate and to bring out points he always fell into opposition and disagreed with everybody. He was a very necessary element and generally appreciated. Sitting next to him was a man who looked far from happy. His face was set with a dogged suspicious determination. He

prefaced all his remarks, after furtively glancing around the room, with 'Speaking 'ere, and to you chaps I baint afraid to say . . .,' or 'knowin' as the gennelman be a stranger there's no 'arm in tellin'. . . .' I could see there was general sympathy with him; he was the representative from an unpopular despotism, and he was silently shaking off the chains. He was only a 'smallholder' after the day's work. The great ones of his village were averse to men rising above their station. Another man had won his freedom through similar bitterness and against like tyranny; he spoke with a defiant jerk of the head and eyes that shot fire. There was a townsman who had made the venture and was cautiously feeling his way to happiness and knowledge. Some had grown grey in working their space of years for Laban's daughter, others had won her, and exulted, whilst still in their prime. For over two hours our debate had never flagged, though all my friends had had a long day on the land. The talk was full of experience and hard fact, yet with a refreshing touch of hope and idealism. Then came a general shaking of rough hands, and as I passed from one to the other,

each man gave me an invitation to 'come an' look us up w'en you're along this way.' It was a brief moment of pride such as perhaps the self-made man feels when he has bought his introduction to 'the county set' with gold, but it was the good genuine soil showing in the cracks and crevices of my hands which gave me the acquaintance of the smallholder.

I stepped out into the darkness. All seemed black after the lamplight, and I groped my way along the hedge in search of my bicycle. The hut emptied and the men passed by me in twos and threes, talking of the evening's meeting, unconscious I was there. 'Lor, Jim, us never 'ad a meetin' like that afore. I suggests as we always gets over our business a bit quicker and 'as a bit of a talk. Can't think why us never thought on it afore.' 'Ay, ay,' was the reply. 'It brings a man out a bit and we all learns a bit from t' other's experience like. It be terrible late, the missus 'll be a-wondering wot's up, but I'm glad I comed to-night!' And so the voices died away. There was a sense of calm attainment in the night air, and a freshness and free circulation of wind over the parched plain after the storm. I sped along

the road with a new life in my heart, a new hope for the morrow.

Next day I was to go and call on Mr. Conni-bear and the young Elisha, and they were to take me all round the village of Holesworthy. At the cross roads the younger man met me. He issued from a large rick-yard where all my friends of the night before seemed to be threshing together, and whence they hailed me from their respective posts. 'There looks a pretty good yield for the year and plenty of straw,' I remarked, pointing to the big rick they were on. 'Ay,' replied my companion, 'and there be wheat of twenty on us in that rick. I be just seein' 'ow a bit of co-operative threshing 'll work. I reckons as it will pay us all 'ands down.' Those who know the native independence of the countryman and his latent suspicion for his neighbour will realise what an achievement this was; but I could not help exclaiming, 'How on earth do you manage to know your own wheat, and agree about it!' My friend laughed. 'Oh, we all knows our own by the colour of the straw, and each binds a bit different, and we all gives a hand in the threshing.' He was a man with the powers of an organiser, a leader

of men at work in an out-of-the-way village, quietly and deliberately aiming at practical ideals. 'Well, we'll just come along to Tom Connibear's house and he'll show you his bit o' handiwork. There be fifteen of us what lives in our own cottages and had 'em built just as we'd a mind to. Afore that there weren't enough cottages for half on us, and them as were, were like pigstyes, and we had no freedom. Well, old Tom he just thought it out and discussed it wi' one or two others, and then he went and talked to the "Co-op." wot we've all bought our stuff off for years. The Co-op. was willing to advance the money on a sound basis; but, mind you, we had some trouble in gettin' the land. W'en it comed to buying the second bit the price was more than doubled, but we meant to have it, and Tom Connibear goes straight for mos' things.'

An oldish man of few words was this pioneer of a great housing scheme. He had a good head, a keen grey eye, and a complete circlet of grey hair surrounding the sunburnt face, but he is still straight as poplar, and doing a good day's work on his eight acres. I give him another ten years before he thinks he is getting old,

for he is well fed and housed, and he has the knowledge of attainment in his heart. As we walked up the quiet lane, bordered on either side by neat gardens and good brick cottages of various sizes and designs, I turned to him inquiringly, 'Did you ever dream of anything like this when you began to fight for it?' I asked. 'Noa, I didn't; them be comfortable little 'ouses them be, but I'd 'ave the street there just a bit straighter if I was beginin' over again.' Such was the calm criticism of his own work. There were detached cottages and half detached cottages; each man had built according to his prospects and whim. We wandered in and out and chatted with the families; there was plenty of cupboard room here, for they had to store their wheat; and there were good bedrooms, for they wanted to keep their families on the land. I had a sense of walking on sunlight as I passed up and down.

These men of great deeds and hard labour had established themselves on the land; they had ruled their own Parish Council, elected their own pastor, but they were capable of embracing a much wider sphere of action. They had bought their experience, and with it a firm

conviction and enthusiasm for the principles for which they had struggled. They had now begun to extend their energies; they were ready to look beyond themselves. But the country is so cut up in circles and cliques, in influences and oppositions, that their outposts, like scouts in a guerilla warfare, stand scanning the horizon to find some weak spot in the cordon of block-houses. 'Ay, ay,' said Mr. Connibear, 'the Co-op. be willing enough, and we've got chaps in several villages a-watching for a bit o' land. But as soon as we begins nibblin' the price is put up by them as ought to know better. Never mind, the time'll come, though not in my lifetime, likely.'

There are people who tell us that the country-man is a dullard and cannot help himself. I am inclined to think that such folk do not want him to, and it is very easy to stand in his way.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GOLD IN THE GRAIN

A LARGE proportion of our country folk have to face life with a persistent sense of insecurity. The labourer who has 14s. or even 16s. a week, and many have far less, must reckon with winter and wet time, however good his employer may be in trying to find him work. Unless he is a very lucky man his harvest money and overtime will not compensate for these annual losses. There are always days when work is impossible, and a day's loss, or even an hour's loss, means a good deal when a man is earning an existence wage. With such a wage a man can save little for emergencies. A momentary sense of insecurity is often enough to make the foot slip and take a downhill course. In a few instances such insecurity endows a man with an almost superhuman courage and dexterity, but this is a rare exception. The

countryman who is endowed with such courage 'comes to the top' perhaps as a stockman or foreman, when his position is financially improved though his labour becomes almost incessant. Where there is much facility perhaps he becomes a smallholder, and it is this sort of material that makes the successful small man. He must know his art, he must know the land, he must know the meaning of country labour and the slowness of success. Such a man can be a successful smallholder whether he be townsman or countryman, and there is no happier, freer man, I believe. While social conditions remain as they are and education is unchanged, I am confident that the successful smallholder must be the picked man, who on his tiny domain can organise his own labour, husband his own resources, gauge his own prospects. The time will come when every countryman is a little 'great man,' then and not till then the smallholdings of England will become as numerous and successful as those of other countries which have a free peasantry.

The door of Mr. Ralph's cottage was open as I walked up the grey flagstones betwixt the fragrant clipped box hedges; I had a

peculiar sense of openness, a sense of big sunlit spaces covered with yellow corn, though my view on either hand was bounded by a grey wall. I walked straight into the room, knocking as I went, and there, in front of the big chimney-piece, in his black coat, best riding breeches and brown gaiters, stood Mr. Ralph, smallholder. I do not know exactly what was the fascination of his brick-red face and drooping sandy moustache, except that they seemed to have the same consciousness of space and the sun's glow which I had felt irresistibly as I walked up his garden path. It was a grey day and out of season in September, and my friend immediately drew chairs towards the blazing wood fire. 'What a sense of freedom and peace!' I remarked, as I sat down. 'Ay, and my father was but shepherd just under the hills yonder—shepherd to Odo Stapley for nigh on forty years, and a good shepherd too, though I be his son; and he was worth twice his wage as any good shepherd or stockman is nowadays. I reckon it's no fool's job neither, and old Odo used to say to him, "Now, Bill, I baint going to the fair; you knows as well as I what them ewes be worth," and sure enough

my father was as good a judge of a ewe as any man, and his flock was his own pride and the pride of the county too, and he had but 13s. a week all through.' Here Ralph paused for a moment.

'Then how did he manage to start you as a smallholder?' I asked. 'Why, bless you, I worked twelve year as a labourer myself before I became a holder, and then it were quite by chance that I started on my own. It was the frost of '92 from which I reckons everything. Mr. Martin had to give six of us the sack; I'd just taken three-quarters of an acre of ground too, to fill in my spare time. Well, the frost swep' all the blossom I had and shifted me from work too, so things looked pretty black all round. The only thing was to set to on my own bit o' land and look out for a new job. Well, in a few weeks I got a new job and 2s. a week more wages, which kept things going until I got a bit more land, for I see'd then the insecurity like of relying on an employer in a bad season. It was a black year all round. I only had two plums on my trees, and someone else ate they! Yet, it was the frost of '92 as just set me thinking and really put me on my feet.'

‘And now,’ I interposed, ‘you are the owner of six broad acres!’ ‘No, I baint,’ was the reply; ‘I don’t own my own land and don’t want to neither, so long as I knows I ’m not going to be turned out. I wants all the money I can save to put into the land and not to buy it, and if I has any to spare I wants to build a cottage of my own and so feel I can’t be turned from my own village—a cottage, too, as is more or less livable. There are chaps as have bought their land and started crippled, but they was forced to buy or see their plots sold over their heads. All we wants is security of tenure like as we can get from the Council or a long lease.’

‘But what about being turned out,’ I ventured: ‘is there really any likelihood? Was there any truth about the Martin affair?’ ‘Well!’ said Mr. Ralph, ‘it ’s just this way. There be good landlords and there be bad ’uns, and of course in a bad year when a landlord remits rent the Council won’t, but a man can hold his own opinions under the Council, which he can’t always do under a landlord. But it ’s not all landlords neither. The Martin affair was all true enough. I worked under him

eight years and was one of those he turned off, so I ought to know. But there's truth in his point of view if only he'd gone to work honest and said what he meant from the first. Employers see as a man with a bit o' land can't give him all their time and interest. That's right enough, but if they wants a man's time and interest they must pay him more than a mere pittance and treat him a bit different. That's why I took up Martin's case and exposed it as I did, as no one else would. It was a real dirty business, for he'd encouraged men as didn't work for himself to take holdings on his own land. I suppose he know'd good smallholders paid well. But there, he gave us the sack when we applied for our holdings, and there's an end of it. If I wer'n't an independent man to-day, and he'd have me, I'd go back and work for him. He was a fair, generous man in many ways, and I was loath to take up the business at all, for we could have seen his point of view if he'd done it different. Lastly, there's the uncertainty of getting a cottage, let alone a decent cottage. In many places they be all tied cottages, and if one don't work for the farmer one's in the street.'

‘ You want to know how we ’re getting on ? ’ continued my friend. ‘ Well, this is the first year as I can say as every crop right through have been a success, and good crops too we grows ; we ’ve growed as much as twenty sacks to the acre afore now, reckoning three bushels to the sack of wheat. It ’s largely fruit and vegetables we depends on, but we have to go slow in planting fruit ; it needs a bit of capital. Nearly all we smallholders have our pigs, and poultry, some on us, and all of us grows a half acre of wheat. Cone wheat mostly, ’cos we can’t afford to feed the sparrows. There are six of us, the wife and me and four young ’uns, and that half acre keeps us in flour for bread and cakes and cooking for close on six months. It ’s what I calls really living off the land, money doesn’t count so much then ; with the wheat and a good side of bacon in the house, one looks forward to the winter all right. And all the summer one works much lighter, too ; it ’s just as good as having summer all the year round like. We make a tidy bit off the vegetables and fruit, and saves a bit, too, and all the time we ’re knowing we ’re storing up the sun in the wheat for winter time. If

you 'd come back in a month's time, Kate and I 'd have the honour to present you with a home-made loaf. Yes, I employ one chap regular, but he 's an acre of his own now and taking to another three in the spring, but my eldest lad will be coming on to the ground then.'

By this time Mrs. Ralph had brought in the tea. 'You 'll have a bit o' something afore you goes, Mr. Holdenby?' asked Ralph. 'Of course Mr. Holdenby must stay,' put in his wife, 'and I 've no doubt he 'll be liking a couple of eggs and a rasher of ham after his long walk.' Mrs. Ralph was a quiet, restful woman, who said little and presided well. Ralph lived proudly off the land, yet all its modesty and simplicity had entered into his manners, though, from being a labourer, he had come to be the chairman of his Parish Council.

I left Ralph's cottage with a wider sense of light and freedom than when I entered it.

The Earth Mother extends her bounty to all her children. Many a man in the town has felt the true call back to her, and he has the genius of the land in his heart. Earth Mother welcomes him and shares her secrets.

In Mr. Groves of Grove's Gate she possessed a very devoted child, though one who presented a great contrast to Mr. Ralph. The first time that I saw him his face made me curious; with all the vigour of the weather-beaten smallholder it had behind it an intellectual expression which seemed to speak of tradition and culture. Perhaps it was for this reason that I opened the conversation as I did on the second meeting. I waded through a chain or two of dewy savoy's and up a row of dripping fruit trees to the little hovel where I had been told I should find Mr. Groves at work. He was grading some pears for market, and just looked up to shake hands and say he was glad to see me.

I passed a few remarks on the weather and the market price of pears, and then remarked, 'Isn't this village called after you? You're probably the real lord of the manor if only you knew it.' He laughed and replied, 'Oh yes, my people do go back to that, there've always been Groves in the parish, but I don't count anything on that, it's the way a man lives as matters.' 'Surely it's interesting,' I pleaded; but he would not admit it, even though he did

not lack the historic sense and a reverence for the past, for when I remarked that Grove's Gate was an old fruit district he paused in his grading to look up and say, 'Yes, we grew fruit here wellnigh a thousand year ago; it was St. Bernard's monks as taught us to grow fruit.'

I next ventured a remark on seeing him grade his fruit, which was not a common practice in the neighbourhood. 'I'd like to do a good bit more of this sort of thing,' he replied; 'but competition and the trade won't let one, and I have to depend on my own ground for a living. But I can't stand "topping" and the sort of thing as goes on in the markets, though them as "tops" tell me that if they didn't the buyers would think there was no good stuff underneath! But it's a satisfaction to send good stuff, and I think it'll pay in the end. You see, I'm a novice at it at present; I've only been at the job three year. I was a guard on the railway three year back, and I used to pass up and down and look out on the land until I couldn't stand it no longer. I wanted to rest on it, and I knew I'd be able to live there once I could get on to the land. The first two years were bad ones, and it was a narrow

shave, but luckily I had my own cottage and enough to tide over the bad time with; the third year I had a good crop, which put me straight, and now I'm beginning to know a bit, I feel it'll be all right. It's long hours and hard work, but all I want's a decent livelihood and the free life of it. If I'd had a bit more cash I'd 'ave got the land round sooner, but no doubt the experience did me good: though many chaps hav'n't saved the cash to stand two bad years.'

I noticed that there was another man working on Mr. Groves' ground, so I turned the subject, as I was anxious to see something of the relationship between the smallholder and his 'man.' 'Does he run a holding, too?' I asked. 'No, he's only got a patch of ground for his onions and potatoes; he doesn't seem to want more at present, perhaps because I makes it worth his while to work regular for me. You see, I want to learn a bit and I know he's a real good man and worth £1 a week, so I gives it him, and he's keen on the success of the place. I've just done my job; put a few pears in your pocket and we'll go over and talk to him.'

We walked over to where the man was digging. Mr. Groves began the conversation. 'And what did the floods do for yer onions, Mr. Smith?' 'They be right stranded on the top o' my 'edge, Mr. Groves, but the water's going down and them be safe, any'ow. Thankee, while I thinks on it, for takin' our Jess over Cull's Bridge and pas' the Washpool last night. She was a bit frightened at the water to venture alone. By the way, I looked at them pears this morning, and if we don't get 'em to market to-day we'll be losing on 'em. I'll put in an hour or two extry to-night and get 'em cleared off.'

Mr. Groves walked with me through the village and showed me where his father had been born and his grandfather had had his forge. 'We want a few cannon down this street,' he said. 'Look at these cottages, they aren't fit for beasts, yet there's never one empty.' I found that Groves too had been a village Hampden, had resisted the local tyrant and even entered the lists against him in the public press. I asked him to show me the letters, and this he promised to do with an apology, 'You must excuse it being a bit illiterate.

I simply knowed what was right and I tried to put it. I know you understands, so it don't matter ; but we wants a better education to give us a wider view of things. Few on us on the land ever gets time to read, I did get a bit of chance as a guard and I used to read a thing or two off the bookstalls, but if ever I gets time now it's Shelley I turns to. I calls "Queen Mab" grand.'

There was a spirit of simple independence and generous criticism about Groves which seemed like the atmosphere of the broad plain in which he was a toiler. It is as if the free circulation of the air about a man and the rays of the sun going through him imparted the freedom of things. If any man needs hope, too, it is the toiler of the field, the sower of seed. He must never despair ; even in the darkest prospect he must sow or he will lose his year's rotation. That is why the countryman is so patient and persevering ; he of all men needs the knowledge of a secure home and an assured livelihood. 'And you really like your new life ?' I asked Groves as we parted. 'Of course it's long hours,' was his reply, 'and at times it's hard enough

work, but there's a feeling of living right and natural somehow when we're really living off the land. There's inconveniences of course, some on us even has to store our wheat in the parlour for lack of a better place; but there! it keeps well enough, and what's more, we can have a good look at it now and again, and it's a good sight for a man in the winter.' I immediately recalled Mr. Ralph's sentiment on the same subject. Was this, then, the promise which would lighten the countryman's burden. The words of a labouring friend came back to me, 'There's nothing like money worries and not knowing how one's going to face the winter to drag a man down.' Ralph and Groves had been able to put aside this oppression, the mere toiling to live from hand to mouth. They could pick up a handful of the golden grain and see in its flush the promise of more sunshine; they could let it trickle through their fingers with a pleasurable sensation of the passing year. They can raise their heads and face things and take good years with bad; they can look across the Plain and not shrink at the space and light ahead of them.

CONCLUSION—EARTH, THEIR HOPE

‘WHAT is a man but his thoughts and his loves ?’ asks one of the great English medieval mystics. ‘These alone make a man good or bad.’ The appeal of my country friends has been intimate and personal, and though I claim that it has been true to life, I believe, nevertheless, that it will find its way direct to men’s hearts. But these ‘thoughts and loves’ are so much the outcome of each individual man’s condition and surroundings that I have been forced to have recourse to concrete facts and figures to emphasise his environment.

Economists and politicians are in possession of much material, and it falls to their lot to draw out the ground plans for dealing with the appalling conditions of country life which confront them. The cries of just grievance and redress are already to be heard. Men of all parties and vocations are turning their eyes on the land, protesting their determination to

deal with the problem. After a comparative lull of five hundred years the condition of the countryman has once more roused the din of battle, but unlike the actors in that brief and startling episode of 1381, the labourer himself will be silent for the most part to-day. He will look on, and watch, and wait, almost as he watches the rolling seasons and rotations of the years, only with less hope in his breast. He was duped once at the very moment when the wave of successful revolt had reached the steps of the throne. What will be his success to-day, when he is transformed in a battle of words into an economic and political being? Truly it will be only in the silence of the night and sultry stillness that we shall hear his whispered hope and realise his humanity; yet if these things are not given due consideration, no reform can be fully successful or reach the core of village life. There is of necessity a self-consciousness and something of uniformity in all legislation. Countryfolk are almost devoid of these traits, and the land they labour on is coloured with infinite variety. In dealing with the problem this fact must be kept always in sight. Were we to cut up the

face of the countryside from end to end of our island, and apportion it out to well trained holders, we should be little nearer our ideal than we are to-day. Like France, we should be realising the need of larger holdings, too. With the essential legislative enactments, there must go, too, unconscious and voluntary sacrifice and enthusiasm. The situation calls for a revolution of heart as well as of circumstance.

Countryfolk at this moment are not apathetic; they are speculating amongst themselves, but it is only just dawning upon them that 'government' really has the power to relieve them. Though they 'have the vote,' they do not realise that they are 'government,' and I think the proportion of my country friends who vote with any intelligent understanding of the issues involved is very small. For centuries, administration was in the hands of the landed gentry; it then passed under the influence of the great town magnates. All this time, if the villager was not wholly ignored, he was even being robbed by Enclosure Acts or encouraged in pauperism. At last, when legislation came, in the shape of Small Holding and Allotment Acts, it did not work with that

ease and liberty which the countrymen could have hoped for. The housing provisions proved a still greater disappointment. These were the generous gifts to the men who had no influence and a powerful opposition to face, lack of money and no means of agitation. They could not even avail themselves properly of the advantages which might have been theirs. The whole question of providing material aid and fair credit was shelved. But suddenly 'government' has touched the countryman intimately; there has been a sharp rap even at the cottage door—he knows not what to make of 'Them there new Ac's,' except that they have the power both to ameliorate and sting. He is still rubbing his eyes and wondering if he is better or worse off. He is discussing it in the field and over the 'nut-brown' with his mates, and hears talk of a land reform which has passed beyond the disputed regions of theoretic taxation. So, though the countryman may abstain from voting, or allow himself to be driven to the poll in his employer's cart, though he has no means of formulating his demands to the local candidate, yet he is perfectly conscious of what is

wrong; he knows what he wants but has no idea of the way in which to get it. We are so often told 'They have the vote, what more can they want?' Certainly their legal status is better than that of the fourteenth-century peasant, yet he had more spirit, a keener sense of a corporate life, and almost as much freedom. While the business side of agriculture has kept pace with modern times, the labourer has remained almost where he was. Successful farming is as much a capitalist concern to-day as any other successful undertaking. Capitalism will have its pound of flesh, only the union of workers has forced it to grant better conditions and fairer prospects in our towns. To-day united action is practically unknown in the country; there is every difficulty in the way of it, as the failure of 'Joey Arch's' Union has demonstrated. Even the medieval peasants found it possible and necessary to 'gather themselves together in great routs and agree to such confederacy that everyone shall aid other to resist their Lords with strong hand.' So says a Parliamentary statute of 1377. It is difficult to realise the power of local influence and custom in England still to-day.

A fence or a hedge is a very real geographical boundary. Even the economic theories of supply and demand and the dicta about competition need excessive qualification. I have stood on a spot of ground where my right foot was vastly more valuable than my left. Wages ran with the line of the hedge! The folk on the left cannot push through for they live in 'tied' cottages, they are to all intents bound to the soil and the farm. The farmer on the right of the hedge 'does his land better' and gives a reasonable wage, but the men in tied cottages cannot work for him. There are many obstacles in the way of concerted action among countrymen at present, and they must look to some force from outside which is strong enough to negotiate with the capitalism that keeps them down.

To sum up the situation in a word, the countryman lacks freedom in its widest sense as well as most literally. Low wages and ignorance of a wider field of competition make his labour something akin to real serfdom; cramped circumstances and long hours deny him even the full pleasure of country and home life. The countryman, if choice or fate has

mapped out his future on the land, has little prospect of starting well. His education has not fitted him in any special way for his calling, the technical knowledge he has is of local custom alone, gleaned through watching his father. Only through years of experience is he taught general principles of cultivation. He becomes the 'knowledgable chap' solely through his own merit and observation. Thus the very sphere of his activity is limited; maybe it is not in his power to be a stockman or horticulturist—his only choice is ill-paid field labour. I have watched many boys pitchforked on to the land like this. Then, in the matter of his dwelling, the countryman is still more in bondage. I have said enough elsewhere about the dearth of cottages and their total lack of convenience to show how liberty of movement and home economies are limited. I have many friends who have had to seek homes miles from their work, and others again who have had to turn their backs on the country for good and all. But even the available cottages are only too often wrongly termed 'free.' The man who lives in a tied cottage is certainly in bondage. Except where tied

cottages are necessary to ensure to a farmer that stockmen, carters and other responsible men shall live near the homestead, I regard them with the greatest suspicion, for only too often very low wages and hard terms are the complement of tied cottages. The labourer accepts them because he can get no others, and because it frees him from rent; but he has much to say about them to his friends, and if he were offered half a crown a week extra wages instead, I have no doubt which he would choose. But many other cottages carry with them the bondage of ownership. I remember a woman being offered regular work and good pay on the farm, if she would come every day. She told me she was sorry to refuse, but she 'had to go a-charing twice a week at the great 'ouse; I likes the fiel' work bes', and it's better pay, but you see I lives in their cottage.' We are told that the countryside requires 90,000 new cottages at this moment. I could put my finger on villages where eight, ten, twenty cottages would be occupied immediately by toilers on the land to-day. And yet we actually have facilities for rural housing. Is it not sufficient commentary on these facilities that

in one village in a western district where the council has at last got to work they find it necessary to erect sixty cottages at once? I have watched things in 'process of operation' in a village elsewhere for a little over three years. The ground is at last marked out for six new cottages—though there are at least three times the number of applicants, and doubtless after another three years' delay there will be yet more folk waiting for a home, unless they have lost patience and confidence. In the meantime, while landlords and local authorities play about with prices and sites, and condemn unsuitable plans, so as to delay the fulfilment of their obligations as long as possible, congestion only relieved by emigration from the neighbourhood reigns in the village. In another village it may be that the local authorities come to blows over drains, water supply, or 'restrictions,' and, while rival bodies stand on their dignity or make a trial of strength, the cottager is left shivering in the cold or sweltering in overcrowded hovels. Individual and co-operative endeavour, which might be more effective and expeditious, are bound hand and foot because they cannot acquire the land.

The small holding and allotment movement has certainly progressed faster than rural housing, yet even here there is much to be desired. Despite everything, the countryman has clung to his belief in the land. He has maintained the struggle for his one hope—‘a bit o’ ground.’ It is the one kindly and stable element in his life. He knows it thoroughly and he feels confidence in it, just as another man might in his books or chemicals. He is sure, given certain conditions, that he can grow so much wheat or potatoes. He has to trust to the seasons, but he has retained a wonderful faith in these fickle things; even they are more certain than men’s promises. The true countryman loves the earth; you will very rarely hear him say ‘It don’t seem kindly like.’ He has a satisfaction in his work, in the right upturning of the soil, the right sowing of the seed and harvesting the crop: and the results, flour, potatoes, fruit, are things which give at least the same sense of security as money, and a good deal more contentment to some people. Were you to talk to a labourer on his ‘bit o’ land,’ his eyes and manner, if not his tongue, would tell you, far more seriously than Thoreau

ever meant to, 'That to maintain one's self on this earth is not a hardship, but a pastime, if we live simply and wisely.' And yet we usually reserve for the labourer the worst and most unworkable of land. Only recently I crossed from one fertile river-bed over the high hills to another rich alluvial plain. It was on the bleak top of these hills where I found 'the land for the people,' as glaring notice boards announced it. Some acres of young standard fruit trees had been set out in preparation for the unwary small man, and to complete their destruction, the ground had been laid down to their very trunks with a heavy crop of rye grass! The farmers in the valleys smiled and shrugged their shoulders; none of them, with ample capital and sound practical knowledge as landowners or tenants, would make venture of such an industry on these exposed and isolated hilltops. Yet it is the land set apart for the people, who have saved a small sum after years of toil, and are feeling their way back to the earth. As usual, they will get a rough awakening and their last hope will be shattered. The sun shines so brightly there; the winds sweep so boldly from all

quarters, and the hearts of brave small men will begin to beat full of hope, responding to the spacious life around them. Then will come disillusion in the broad sunlight—the hardest of all to bear. But not only does private and philanthropic enterprise provide the worst and most inaccessible land for the man who is likely to succeed only on the very best; the farmer, very naturally opposed to a movement which will deprive him of land and even more of good labour, wrests the very heart from the soil he is forced by local authority to give up, as a final protest against his eviction. Would that he admitted the value of the labour he is losing and chose to retain it by offering a better wage and easier conditions! This is not all with which the labourer struggling for freedom has to contend. There are facilities for renting him land or an allotment, but he has to penetrate the hide of local influence and opposition first. If the landowner will not find him a holding he must appeal to a council of farmers, landowners, and parsons. I have seen something of the futility of these appeals. I know two very successful smallholders, each with a nice bit of arable land and a horse and cart—for over

two years these men have been applying for a small bit of grass to avoid walking several miles every night after work to turn out their horses. The application always falls on deaf ears, and the local farmers will not even rent them a bit of grass-land. They are told that if they could take twenty-five or fifty acres of grass it might be possible; but five or ten acres—no. In a village not far away is a group of smallholders which has formed itself into a society. They applied together to the principal landlord for some land. This time the smallholder was told that, if he applied individually, his request might be graciously considered—his society could not be recognised. The council will only listen to numbers, the landlord to individuals! Such are the vagaries and whims of local authority to which the small men are liable to be exposed. It is easy from year to year to keep things hanging in the balance, to shift responsibility, to wait, to delay whilst the countryman goes on existing. It is notorious that the farmer on the local council, always dreading an increase of rates, vetoes nearly every progressive motion with the amendment that ‘we remains as we

be,' and one cannot help sympathising with the farmer to a large extent. If he could be partially relieved of his burdens he might be more willing to develop local education and enterprise.

The central chapters of my book proclaim only too loudly the crying need for education in its widest as well as its most technical sense; we shall benefit enormously in the country when something is done to combat the ignorance which clogs our industry. In this direction at least the line of advance has begun. Authority has come to see that bad and careless farming are curses to the community, and a system of education and research has been inaugurated. But as yet this hardly touches my friends, though better farming should mean better conditions for themselves. They have, too, a real delight in good cultivation; they like to see 'clean land and in good 'eart,' and there is much contempt for the farmer who robs the ground of its 'nature.' Perhaps some day education may touch country folk more intimately. We could afford to learn lessons from 'Les Frères de l'Instruction Chrétienne' across the Channel. These Brethren work 'to

establish in the minds of the children a love of the country and of rural pursuits.' They develop those traits of character and genius which will attach them by an impelling devotion to the land. They fight against the false idea that life is only at its fullest in the town. Even in our own villages I have seen a glowing influence radiate from the heart of some unknown schoolmaster—a man who has felt the call to his office. The children's hands are full of flowers, the schoolroom windows are a bower of them; the garden plots are full of bloom. The hillside echoes of an evening with the merry voices of little folk who have learned to find life sporting in the heather, chasing insects fleet of wing, and dancing with ready feet around the maypole. I have often thought, too, that the cottager and even the smallholder would face the prospect of winter with a bolder heart if he had learned the secret of some art to occupy his hours at home. There are districts where smallholders are always balked for lack of 'empties,' where fruit bottling and drying might be done locally, where the estate and farm carpentry could be carried on at home, the fencing, hurdles, wheelbarrows

made on the spot, if only the technical knowledge and enterprise were there. It was brought home to me very forcibly one winter morning when I discovered a sturdy smallholder friend cracking stones by the roadside. 'Hulloa!' I exclaimed, 'have the crops failed you this year?' He laughed: 'Noa, noa,' was his reply, 'but it be a lot better earnin' good money this way w'en things be slack than doing nought at 'ome for a month or two.'

If the countryman has little control over his occupation, the cottage he lives in and the possibilities of bettering himself, he has still less over the wages he receives and the hours he works. These things, I repeat, are largely a matter of very local custom and consideration. It is hard to generalise about them. It would be still harder to fix a univereal minimum wage; it could only be done by an impartial external authority with exhaustive local knowledge to work upon. Agriculture differs so enormously from any purely mechanical industry. There are so many men engaged in it, and living on it, who, in the world of commercial competition, would have 'gone under' long ago. On the land it is far easier to 'Toe the line' This

poor production helps to keep wages generally low. A scientific education should in time strike at the root of the evil, but the process would be very long. If these men cannot give better wages they should be prepared to give their labourers other facilities. Generally speaking, wages do not leave the average working man on the land much margin. If I average his wage all the year round at 18s. a week I am putting it a great deal too high for some districts, even including extras and overtime. If a man has a wife and family of four children this wage allows 3s. per head each week for everything; but I am not subtracting 2s. 6d. a week cottage rent, for I am supposing for the moment that the wife's summer earnings in the fields will find rent for the year. This is stating the case of the ordinary field labourer very favourably, but it leaves him little margin for saving in order to better his own position or his children's. If he has a son old enough to go on the land he is in a little better position, for he, too, can begin to contribute to the family earnings, and with great care he and his father may start a small allotment. If they were enabled to raise a loan at a

reasonable rate their chances would be materially strengthened. One or two bad years to start with, the initial outlay in shed and tools, seed and manure, often prevent a family from starting successfully. Moreover, the growing son needs some inducement to make him stay at home and on the land. He wants to see some future and possibilities. I know keen men remaining single for years in order to save out of their poor wage and start an allotment before they marry their girl; others have the claims of old parents, weak brothers or sisters, and they never get a fair start. Married men, in every way fitted to become independent holders, have told me that they dared not risk their little savings on the land because of their families. Instead, I have known them insure their sons, so that at a certain age they may draw a bonus and use the money to set them up in some other vocation in life away from the land. The countryman has no access to credit.

A working day of from 6 A.M. to 6 P.M. with an hour and a half off for lunch and tea, does not allow for much spare time. In the stress of harvest there is 'overtime' on the farm, with the possibility of earning 4*d.* an

hour for it. Even then the countryman works early and late in his garden or on his holding. I have worked side by side with one until the darkness of the summer nights stopped us. My friends only get spare time when it is wet or frosty, and I have said elsewhere that I wish they were generally better equipped to meet such enforced rest. We are bound to work early and late in the country ; we are bound to work overtime owing to our occupation ; but for all these long hours we hardly see any adequate return. With this endurance, strain, and perseverance, my friends require good housing, good food, and occasional relaxation ; but at this moment I do not see what they can do themselves to obtain these things. They are giving their all ; they are giving magnificent labour which I have learned to rate very highly ; they are literally giving their lives from daylight to dark. This power to work combined with a specialised knowledge and knack and personal integrity is the labourer's capital. As things are situated I do not think the countryman can pay for his wants in any other way. When we have raised his wage and his whole standard of living, then he can come forward ;

for there is all the promise of success in his keenness and workmanship. Even if the countryman is making big demands upon the nation, he is not asking one whit too much. He is providing that strong physique and growing manhood which alone will keep us a great people in the future. His environment has made him a unique asset to national life. Men cannot watch earth replenishing herself year after year without feeling confidence. Here is a never-ending promise of life. The sun, the air, the rain, and labour are our very capital on the land. Even decay is giving the soil new 'nature'—the activity of the clover ley is building up the wheat to come. If we have the cunning, frost and sun alike may be our workmen. We can force these elemental things to bless us ; yet we are never completely masters, we are always schooled by fighting, kept hardy by rebuffs. We are ever using and trying to subdue things too big and strong for us. We breed a race as sturdy as the adventurers on sea and air. We have still on the land earth's most devoted and faithful sons, a splendid race of little giants, men like Squire Hobbs and the Knowledgable Chaps, men such as composed the

village gemot, men even like Bill the believer in 'nut-brown.' When I am with these men in the valleys or on the hills, whether in the north, the midlands, or the south, I feel a confidence and optimism such as we all experience when walking down the sunlight. They have lived their lives with an enduring hope, a real simplicity. These folk must once more people the countryside with strong sons and fair daughters who need not seek the towns to find freedom, prosperity, and a full life. My friends possess something beyond all this; there is the seed of a deeper secret in their hearts, such as might develop into a fuller vision and a wider life. Elsewhere I have compared them to children—though perhaps not in the sense that I like to use the word. Country people are childish in many ways, but they are also children with a more enviable simplicity. When I am with them my mind irresistibly turns to the Third great 'Century' of Traherne's 'Meditations,' where he describes 'Those sweet and curious apprehensions of the world' which he had as a child, before 'the outward bondage of opinion and custom' tried to disillusion him. In the mystic's own words, 'Natural things

are glorious, and to know them glorious.' As a child he perceived 'Everything was at rest, free and immortal.' 'The corn was orient and immortal wheat' and 'the sweetness and unusual beauties' of the trees made his 'heart to leap.' Those things 'which we nickname civility and the mode amongst us,' says Traherne, 'put grubs and worms in men's heads that are enemies to all pure and true apprehensions, and eat out all their happiness.' Now my country friends very seldom express themselves articulately, yet they have those simple apprehensions of the earth, perhaps because they are so largely unfettered by 'civility and the mode.' I have heard them talk of the 'chitting' corn with something like reverential awe, and their very speech and mood seem to echo the seasons. They 'come nearer to Adam, God and angels in the simplicity of their wealth.' They have not that store of preconceived ideas to draw upon which is so much a townsman's legacy. They have not the same conventionality of moral outlook, they have not the same idea of 'the right do.' They live more from the heart. They are in perpetual contact with great elementals,

which give them a clarity and unity of view quite unconsciously, such as many of us might strive to arrive at artificially. They are born into it and with great possibilities, for ‘you never enjoy the world aright till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars.’

What, then, can we do to help this race of earth’s children, so powerful with possibility for the future? We have first to house the countryman properly and to give him real freedom on the land. If we were to provide him with a cottage standing on a good garden of at least a quarter of an acre, he would be willing and able to pay a bigger rent for it. For building purposes and for cultivation, the land must be accessible at its real agricultural value. When the countryman looks round on the wonderful dovetailing of local interest and influence one cannot wonder that he often gives up in despair. ‘There ain’t no gettin’ roun’ these chaps. There’s no one to get at, like; now, if only we could ’av a talk wi’ some of them chaps at Wes’minster—’ said a villager to me one day. Countryfolk at least want to make the best use of the

facilities dangled before them ; but these affairs are too much in local hands. I am sure there will be less grievance among villages, more co-operation among landlords, if only an independent authority free from party bias could take cognisance of local requirements and advise as to ways and means. Then the countryman's early education should be such that he can start his profession qualified to demand the wage of a skilled labourer. It should be impossible for a man after thirty years' labour to be drawing only 11s. a week. Folk must be kept on the soil, too, by the prospect of a future which has development. The countryman must have reasonable credit put within his reach—preferably a credit which will bind him very closely by local ties and responsibilities, yet which has Government security. The organisation of his efforts, too, needs Government encouragement and advice. I do not think the nation will be called upon to advance large sums for the purchase of land—of all the smallholders and farmers I know, I have only met one who wanted to buy his ground, though they all longed for security of tenure, provided they paid their rent

regularly. At present, when the ownership of land is constantly changing, they are kept in perpetual fear. We have none too much capital invested in cultivation, and I feel confident that this would be a far more profitable investment for the nation and far more to the liking of my country friends. I have often been told, 'If they likes to give us the land, then I'm all for ownin'; but them as puts their capital into buyin' always starts 'andi-capped.' I have seen case after case with my own eyes proving this, where smallholders have been forced to buy to avoid eviction or where they have a mortgage to pay off. Often the smallest loan would set a man on the road to independence; the countryman is keen enough to co-operate with his labour, a local bank would encourage him to be still more thrifty.

But side by side with this movement must go that other endeavour to obtain a brighter and more civilised country life. I speak of a life which no legislation can touch, though until law has brought relief from material hardships we cannot hope to attain to it. Even then we can only realise it when we learn 'that

men and women are, when well understood, a principal part of our true felicity.' It is only through friendship, intimacy, and co-operation in its widest sense that we can hope to go forward to the fullest life which is possible to us. In short, we have no less a task before us than the creation of a new spirit in the countryside. Men's hearts must be tuned to one great wave of harmony. We have only to look across the waters to realise the essential part which such a spirit has played in the practical regeneration of agricultural life. It is impossible for Government to force this attitude of mind, this disposition of heart, which can only come through inspiration and reason. But Government can furnish all the material aids ; whatever else is needful we must supply among ourselves. The practical man and the pioneer must go hand in hand. I cannot refrain from quoting Mr. G. W. Russell's stirring appeal : ' We want pioneers of civilisation to go out into our country districts with a divine passion in them, the desire of the God-implanted spirit, to make the world about them into some likeness of the Kingdom of light.' ' It is this spirit of

mutual interdependence and comradeship in life,' says the same writer, 'continually generated and maintained and inbred into the people, which is the foundation on which a great state, a great humanity, a beautiful civilisation can be built.' Every village in England should ring with this appeal. Let it be read aloud in every agricultural institution in the country. Everywhere it would reach some heart that would leap forward with a confidence and strength worthy of Whitman himself.

I remember one night entering a wayside coffee-house in a small decaying market-town, the centre of a large and struggling agricultural district. It was the time of year when 'travellers' were on the road. I strolled in behind one of them as he went to drink a cup of coffee and buy a pennyworth of some of the strange, unappetising viands displayed on plates in the window. He stood restless by the counter, taking his refreshment hurriedly. In a few seconds he was on the road again tramping with despondent gait. A white-haired old man sat at the coffee urn, smoking a long pipe and saying little. He just shook his head

despairingly at me as the 'traveller' passed out, and, pointing with the end of his pipe, he said, 'An' that 's wot we 've come to at las' in the country!' 'What do you mean?' I replied, hoping to draw him. 'Mean?' was his scornful reply, 'Why, I've been 'ere all my life and seen things go from bad to worse. Cottages crumblin', and fam'lies goin', and men just a-trampin' in and out for the harvest time, and wages at starvashin point. I be the last of a bunch o' small'olders as was on the soil together—and I still be's there because I saw 'ow things were goin', and I started this 'ere place on the ruins o' the land as it were. Yes, I be's the werry last on 'em. Of late I've sat 'ere mainly, year by year a-waitin' and a-watchin', and seein' the best o' the chaps about 'ere a-dribblin' away, and the werry nature a-goin' from the land like. It's all eyes for the towns and there's never no word for the land, and w'en they've used us all up they'll find out as to w'ere the bes' Englishmen came from then; but it'll be too late.' The old man had risen to his feet and was shaking with excitement. He spoke as if he were suffering from a grievous

personal wrong. ‘Ay, ay,’ he went on, ‘I loves the land, and it’s a shame to see things a-goin’ so—sometimes w’en I sees decent chaps on the road I tries my ’ardest to keep ’em ’ere and bring ’em back—but it’s no good—there’s no injucements to offer ’em—it’s all up-’ill, and I don’t see no light nowhere.’ ‘It’s coming,’ I interrupted; ‘it’s better late than never; everyone’s talking of the land; in a few months Parliament will be too, you’ll see. They’re awake at last.’ The old man leaned over the counter and took me by both shoulders, and staring straight into my face, he asked, ‘And d’you believe that?’ ‘I’m absolutely certain of it,’ I said. ‘Both political parties are pledged to attempt some sort of reform. We shall get something done, somehow. Everyone’s full of it.’ The pressure on my shoulders, which had become almost painful, was relaxed, and the old man sank back into his chair with a sigh. He resumed his wistful gaze down the white road—that vein which seemed to be draining the land’s very life-blood—and without looking at me again murmured, half to himself, ‘Well, maybe as I’ll die ’appy yet, but I’ll see it out ’ere w’ere I be’s; and likely as not

some chap 'll bring tidin's of wot 's agoin' on,
as 'e 've a-done.' I stepped out on to the white
road determined to tramp that way again.
I am going back to bear tidings of the dawn
of that fuller yet attainable life—

Life, the dream, shall be their robe,
Large as air about the globe.

THE END

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